

The TaraElla Story

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This book combines content from my 2021 works 'A Trans Popstar's Story: Being Trans and Chasing Dreams During Quarterlife', 'Eight Lessons from my Quarter Life Period' and 'The Background and Context of Moral Libertarianism' to paint a complete picture of my journey so far.

Contents

I. SETTING OUT ON A JOURNEY

| | |
|--|----|
| Chapter 1. Just Another Young Adult Finding Their Way | 7 |
| Chapter 2. It Starts With Love And Compassion | 12 |
| Chapter 3. Breaking The Barrier..... | 23 |
| Chapter 4. In Context: The World Was Like This, Once Upon A Time | 28 |
| Chapter 5. In Context: How Reality TV Changed The World. | 42 |

II. CONFLICT, UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGE

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 6. Meeting The 'Enemy' | 56 |
| Chapter 7. In Context: What Reality TV Taught Us | 61 |
| Chapter 8. Bridging the Divide | 72 |
| Chapter 9. In Context: The Religious Awakening That Never Was | 80 |
| Chapter 10. It's A Matter Of Understanding..... | 88 |
| Chapter 11. In Context: What It's Like to Join the Cultural Conversation | 94 |
| Chapter 12. The Marketplace Opens Up..... | 112 |
| Chapter 13. In Context: The Dawn of the New Media Landscape | 117 |
| Chapter 14. In Context: How 'Citizen Journalism' Changed Politics | 129 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 15. Reality Trumps All Theory | 136 |
|---|-----|

III. MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 16. Clear Vision Make Strong Movements..... | 143 |
| Chapter 17. Everything in Life Starts With a Clear Purpose | 148 |
| Chapter 18. My Ways of Getting Clarity | 154 |
| Chapter 19. Be Patient As Life Unfolds | 157 |
| Chapter 20. It's A Matter Of Understanding - And Patience | 163 |
| Chapter 21. In Context: Civil Rights and Marriage Equality | 169 |
| Chapter 22. Utopian Plans Lead To Disasters | 179 |
| Chapter 23. The Long Arc Of History | 185 |

IV. THE HARDER PARTS OF LIFE

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 24. It's Not Always A Meritocracy | 192 |
| Chapter 25. Expect the Unexpected | 197 |
| Chapter 26. The Political Winds Suddenly Shifted..... | 201 |
| Chapter 27. Political Currents Are A Long Term Thing | 206 |
| Chapter 28. Don't Just Look At The Surface..... | 213 |
| Chapter 29. What Is Settled Isn't Settled | 220 |
| Chapter 30. The Journey That Brought Me To Embrace Positivity..... | 222 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 31. In Context: Political Passions in the Early 21st Century West | 227 |
| Chapter 32. You Can't Defeat Negativity With Negativity .. | 235 |
| Chapter 33. Sometimes, You Have To Go Alone..... | 240 |

V. TAKE A STEP BACK

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 34. It's The Journey That's Important | 246 |
| Chapter 35. Final Words on the Democratization of Media | 250 |
| Chapter 36. The Importance of Telling Our Stories | 257 |

I. SETTING OUT ON A JOURNEY

Chapter 1. Just Another Young Adult Finding Their Way

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the 'quarter life' period of human life, roughly defined as the late teens to mid thirties. In the past, it used to be assumed that people went straight from being a teenager to being an adult. However, it has been recently recognized that there is a period of transition, in which there are certain things that need to be navigated and resolved. Some have described this as recognizing a new 'life stage', similar to how the teenage life stage was first recognized by academics and society alike many decades ago.

There has been particular study of the 'quarter life crisis', a phenomenon where young adults go through a crisis that looks a bit similar to a mid-life crisis. This phenomenon has often been blamed on recent economic developments, like

the 2009 global financial crisis, rapidly rising house prices, and the casualization of jobs, leading to young adults being unable to reach the milestones of adulthood at the same age as generations before. However, I think we could also look at it from a more positive angle: that the quarter life period allows us to fulfil several developmental goals, which ultimately make our lives much more meaningful.

I think the quarter life period allows us to fulfil three important tasks: to find ourselves, to find our purpose in life, and to find our values. The struggle to find one's feet on these three things, including both the necessary introspection and the social experiences, may be difficult at times, but it allows us to have firmly established views on these things at the end of the process. In turn, this will allow us to navigate life and the choices we face with more certainty and confidence in the future. And perhaps most importantly, to live a meaningful life.

I personally had a wild journey in achieving all three of the aforementioned tasks. Being LGBT in an era where those issues were at the forefront of the political culture wars shaped my identity. However, I also learned that this is only a part of my identity, and it doesn't have to define who I am. That identity struggle may have dominated my life for a few years, but after that, after I became more at peace with it, life simply goes on. There are many other things that are more interesting about me, that more truly and uniquely define me, and I found that life is more satisfying when I focus on those things more.

Being an independent musician and writer at the dawn of the internet and social media revolution shaped my development. I learned that contributing to the cultural conversation and trying to help make the world a better place is very rewarding in and of itself, and is what I want to do with this life. I learned that new and unexpected opportunities open up, and the

important thing is to be ready to take advantage of these opportunities as they arise. I also learned that change is constant, and phenomenon come and go all the time, so we should be flexible with our plans, and not fixate too much on any one development we see in front of us.

Finally, coming of age during a time of great moral debates helped me find my values. I learned the value of seeing things from all possible angles, and the importance of rational thinking, debate, and conversation with people who have a different view. I learned why liberty is more important than group identity, why tribalism is bad, and why echo chambers should be avoided at all costs. Most importantly, I learned that it is having values, and living out those values in some way, that makes life itself meaningful. Which also ties in with the purpose of my cultural work, and ultimately my identity.

In this book, I will share the lessons I learned during my quarter life period, and how these lessons have helped me find the meaning of my life. I hope it will be of help to someone out there.

Chapter 2. It Starts With Love And Compassion

Let's start here. What defines a person? I believe that, above all, it is the values. To understand a person, we must start from their values. So what are my values? What direction does my moral compass point in? I believe it all starts with love and compassion.

The awakening of my social and political conscience began around the time I started college, in 2003, at the age of 16. It was a time that was full of moral challenges and controversies. The West was still recovering from the major psychological and social impacts of the 9/11 attacks. There was concern about the erosion of civil liberties and the rise in racism in response to the attacks, in many Western countries. The US and its allies entered the Iraq War under dubious justifications, triggering an intense anti-war movement, the

likes of which was not seen since the end of the Vietnam War. Gay marriage rights became a hot topic, encouraged by its legalization in the first English-speaking places like Ontario and Massachusetts, as well as the US Supreme Court finally making it legal to be gay across all 50 states. This, in turn, triggered a major backlash and 'awakening' from the religious right, which conservative politicians would eagerly take advantage of leading up to the national elections the following year in the US, Canada and Australia.

It was in this context, that the beliefs I had up until that point, would be tested and challenged by the unfolding events and debates. The Iraq War, an unnecessary war that inevitably came with destruction and loss of life, was something I was naturally opposed to. My view was that, any decent human being who treated others with love and compassion had to oppose it. Yet, there were indeed people, many of them probably not bad people, who strongly

supported the war, thinking that it would 'spread freedom' to Iraq. Even at 16, I knew that this wasn't going to work, and was also fundamentally wrong. It was hard for me to reconcile with the fact that good people were supporting something I thought to be immoral. I gradually realized that good people were morally fallible too, and there needs to be safeguards to prevent a bandwagon effect in supporting immoral actions. Compounding this was some commentators and 'activists' alike who strongly supported the Bush administration and/or the war, who essentially painted dissenters as traitors. The political Right may style themselves as defenders of free speech today, but I will never remember how many of them encouraged this kind of worldview and rhetoric.

And then, there was the Dixie Chicks boycott, which was actually the first example of what we now call cancel culture, that I can remember. It was the start of my long record of opposing

cancel culture. Back then, I found cancelling people, destroying people's careers for their beliefs, totally unreasonable, totally uncivilized, and also incompatible with love and compassion, and I still feel that way today. I also thought deeply about the political implications of cancel culture: if people can have their career destroyed just by saying what their conscience believes to be true, what does that mean for the health of Western democracy? After all, even though I wasn't even old enough to vote back then, I knew that in a Western democracy, the main brake on immoral government actions is through elections, where we elect our governments and hold them accountable. Hence, the moral conscience of every citizen must be clear, and we must be able to decide what is right and wrong ourselves, without pressure or coercion from influential people or authority figures.

This was perhaps the start of my Moral Libertarian idea: since no human being is

infallible, no matter their intentions, no human being should be granted moral agency over and above another. This is why effective free speech is so important. Western democracies generally have robust safeguards on political speech, but this often only prevents the government itself suppressing speech. The Dixie Chicks boycott, as well as the pressure on Iraq War dissenters to shut up in general, taught me that even if free speech is theoretically legally protected, it might still be limited socially, to the point that people actually feel afraid of calling out immoral acts. Hence, we need a culture of respecting free speech, not just to the letter of the law, but to recognize it as a foundational principle of the Western democratic moral code, due to its important role in preventing immorality from going unchecked.

A related issue was the racism and tribalism that was prevalent in that period. There was, of course, the crude racism that one could feel throughout society. But in intellectual circles,

there was something even more dangerous. There was talk of how Western civilization and Islamic or middle eastern culture were incompatible, even invoking historical events such as the Crusades to justify a 'clash of civilizations' worldview. Now, I recognize that different cultures have their own history, their own context and their own moral code, and are not exactly interchangeable. That's why I always say that the West should mind its own business, and why, as a Western citizen, I only comment on Western society and politics. However, it should still be possible for different cultures to live and coexist peacefully on this planet. We should be able to find plenty of common ground in our common humanity. While we may live in very different contexts, and live under different cultural, legal and political systems, it remains true that we all care deeply for our families, our friends, and our communities. Love and compassion is practiced around the world every day, even if the details differ across different cultural belief systems. This is what I mean by our common humanity. A 'clash of civilizations'

worldview basically denies this common humanity, and ultimately justifies racism, tribalism, and even immoral wars. Seeing this 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric made me realize the dark side of humanity, and the grave dangers of adopting any us-vs-them worldview. This is why my views have been underpinned by a strong moral individualism ever since.

The issue of gay marriage rights was the first major issue that challenged the worldview I was taught to have during my upbringing. Growing up in the homophobic 1990s, in a conservative context, I strongly believed that the gay marriage movement was wrong. There was a time when I actually believed all the things the anti marriage equality activists said: that gay marriage would destroy family values, that the movement had an agenda to radically change society, that gay marriage was 'not natural' and was hence social engineering. But by 2003, when the first gay marriages occurred in the English-speaking world, I saw that these were

happy couples celebrating their big day, just like straight couples. Who am I to deny that to them? That would indeed be anything but loving and compassionate!

The fact that many good people supported the Iraq War, taught me that good intentions didn't necessarily mean morally sound views. I had the good intention of upholding family values and protecting the health of the social fabric, things that are still dear to my heart today, but it didn't mean my old views on gay marriage were necessarily sound. I thought more deeply on the issue of gay marriage, and whether there are any bad implications for society, and I decided that there were none. So I became a supporter of gay marriage. And events since then, including the fact that gay marriage has been legalized across most of the West without any negative effects on society, have proven my change of heart to be correct.

My experience with changing my views on gay marriage taught me several things. Firstly, one should always be open to re-examine their pre-existing beliefs, and admit that they were wrong. Secondly, one should not just believe the propaganda of activists, but rather take the effort to independently think about the issues in front of us. Finally, one should not take an us-vs-them view on political differences, because people can always change their minds. On gay marriage, I was once strongly on one side, and I moved to the opposite side to become a strong advocate on that side. I also had the additional advantage of having been on the other side, so I know where their arguments and concerns were coming from. To understand where people who disagree are coming from, I believe, is the most important part of changing minds. Too many activists harbor an essentially tribalist attitude, and basically refuse to understand and empathize with the other side. I believe this is a fundamental mistake.

The moral worldview that I developed from the events of the opening years of the 21st century, guided by my commitment to love and compassion, and the practical implications of this when operating in the real world, have served me well over the years. I believe history has generally vindicated the stances I took at 16: most people now think the Iraq War was a mistake, conservatives who boycotted the Dixie Chicks are now decrying cancel culture nowadays, there is a renewed focus on free speech, and gay marriage has been legalized in most of the West, and enjoys high levels of support among the public. While the issues of 2003 seem like history now, we are faced with new issues today (I am writing this in 2021), where the same principles remain applicable, probably because human nature is fundamentally unchanging. Today's identity politics, of both the left-wing and right-wing varieties, is just as tribalist as the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric back then. Cancel culture mainly comes from a different section of society nowadays, but it is still morally wrong in exactly

the same way. The moral panic about gay marriage seems to have turned into moral panic about certain trans issues, which unfortunately has a more direct impact on me personally. Fortunately, my experience of having been on both sides of the gay marriage debate continues to serve me well in arguing against the new moral panic. Finally, pro-war, pro-conflict neo-conservative forces appear to be making a comeback in Western politics. We will need to maintain the same anti-war commitment that we had back then. It will be rooted in the same moral arguments we had back then, which remain as valid as ever.

Chapter 3. Breaking The Barrier

It all began with the dream. Ever since I was young, I had wanted to be somebody who participated in the cultural conversation, rather than just observe it. Back in the 1990s, I had observed that this world was clearly divided into two kinds of people: those who made the culture that we lived in, and those who just watched other people make the culture. I was determined to be one of those who made the culture. I didn't know what I wanted to make, I didn't know what I wanted to say, but I knew I wanted to 'join the conversation', and help shape the culture.

However, there were a few problems. Firstly, I didn't know how to get into those exclusive places where they make the culture, i.e. TV studios, Hollywood, established record labels, or at least your local radio station. I knew nobody who had any connection to that world, and it seemed like most people in that world

were connected with each other. In other words, it seemed that you had to 'know the right people' to 'get the entry ticket'. Secondly, well, I'm trans. And back in the 1990s and 2000s, there certainly weren't any trans people I knew of, in those exclusive places where they made the culture. In fact, back then, there was never anything about trans people anywhere in the mainstream media. It was something that people just didn't talk about at all. Nowadays, post 'trans tipping point', it's hard to imagine, right?

Anyway, I got the message. I didn't know the right people to get my 'entry ticket', and in any case I wasn't the kind of person they wanted. Although I wanted to help make the culture, I was born in the wrong place, and perhaps at the wrong time, for that exclusive club. (The very existence of that exclusive club feels so wrong to me, by the way, because everyone should be able to help make culture if they want to, but it was simply the way things were back at the turn

of the century.) The world was determined to keep me from achieving my dreams, in other words.

And then, the reality TV era came. Back in the early to mid 2000s, reality shows about everything, from music to cooking, from dancing to renovation, and even 'hard to classify' shows like Big Brother, took over prime time TV all over the West. Suddenly, it seemed like you don't need to know the right people to get your entry ticket anymore. I mean, I know that the reality (no pun intended) isn't that simple, but back when I was a teenager, and social media wasn't even a thing yet, it sounded like a real breakthrough. And a lot of the time, you don't need to be the 'right kind of person' either: reality TV provided a 'platform' for all kinds of people who wouldn't otherwise have been represented on national prime time TV. There were even LGBT people sometimes, in an era where LGBT representation was otherwise dismal. I remember learning that Australian Idol

had a drag queen as one of its contestants, and thinking, maybe, just maybe, I could make it too. You know, it may not sound like a big deal now, but back in 2003, it was certainly groundbreaking! Of course, not everyone liked that the barriers were being broken down: many commentators, mainly older ones, used to say that reality TV people were 'famous for being famous', that is, they were famous for nothing. As if many of the old-school media icons weren't also like this.

There's another thing that made reality TV great: the people were relatable. They weren't distant. They weren't part of some exclusive club that you had to know people to enter. They weren't millionaires and billionaires. The fact that many reality shows also spend some time telling the background story of the contestants made them even more relatable. And then, week after week, you joined them as they battled their way through the competition, surviving again and again against the odds. Their

battles to survive and win were real life inspiration for teenage me, and when I faced challenging times in my life, (which there were many even back then, some of them related to being trans of course,) I would sometimes imagine I was a reality TV character, trying their best to make the best of a bad situation, and hopefully emerge stronger on the other side. Now, this may not sound like the proudest thing to say from the perspective of a 35-year-old adult, but it's true that teenagers struggling with their life issues do better if they have people and stories to relate to, and I'm certainly glad that I had those back then.

So, forget what the reality TV snobs say. Reality TV is great! It even helps change lives for the better, including those watching at home.

Chapter 4. In Context: The World Was Like This, Once Upon A Time

Part of why the world had long been the way it was, was because of the limitations of the way people 'communicated' back then. For newspapers, radio stations and television channels to be profitable, there can only be a very limited number of each. In fact, regarding radio and TV, governments only issue a very limited number of licences to begin with, meaning that most people only had access to a dozen or so radio stations and a handful of TV stations. This situation only changed slightly in recent years, with the rise firstly of cable television in the 1980s and 90s, and then the replacement of analog TV with digital TV, which allowed more stations to be broadcasted. But still, the opportunity to 'broadcast' was very limited, and it was rationed out only to people whom the elite deemed worthy.

For example, in the old media, for a musician to gain audience, they had to have access to radio air time. This access is generally 'locked up' completely by big record labels, so no matter how good your stuff was, you could only play it at pubs, if the big labels gave you no time. It was also quite difficult to build a loyal following or show your 'uniqueness' adequately. Whilst 'celebrities' promoted by big media had the required avenues to impress upon others their carefully crafted 'images', most independent artists simply had no such chance to even be understood properly at all, when all they could do is to perform at shows randomly across their region, to audiences who mostly haven't heard of them before and will not hear about them again.

Similarly, the only people whose political opinions could be widely shared were those published in newspapers and magazines, and you would have to first impress the editor if you were to even get a 'letter to the editor'

published. Besides, there was no way for most people to have an ongoing 'opinion column' that can be read by the public of any kind, unless they were contracted to do so by a media organisation. You just can't build a following, let alone a cultural or political movement, by random letters to the editor.

In this environment, there would eventually be no point for most people to continue to think of themselves as a 'unique individual'. There was a very clear divide between celebrities, established journalists and opinion leaders on one hand, and the rest of the population on the other hand. The former were clearly distinguishable 'somebodies', the latter were indistinguishable 'nobodies'.

I literally think that not having a voice in this world counts as oppression, and hence most of humanity had been technically oppressed, though they did not know it. Just like how most

people in history would not have even dreamed of much of what we take for granted as 'human rights' nowadays. It's the way human history has always been.

And beyond the selfish need to tell the world about yourself, the old world order had wider societal implications too. Whoever holds the power to get heard by the public also holds the key to control culture itself, ultimately. Hence in that old world, very few elites and their agenda would control the thinking of much of the population. Their views would be broadcasted via a variety of media and would dominate what people would hear. The media may change over time, from newspapers to radio to television, but in essence, it's the same model of an elite few having the chance to speak up, and the majority having the chance to only listen. No wonder the culture of decades and centuries gone by were so conformist, and minority groups and views had so little (essentially no) representation. In such an environment, it was

also no wonder that only the mainstream, conventional and privileged were represented in culture, and the rest were disenfranchised.

This situation didn't just exist long ago. It was still so during my childhood, and indeed it was largely still so during my teenage years, as the world moved into a new century. My 2006 short novel *Eastlands Dreaming* was about imagining a future where culture creation was completely democratised. Are we there yet? I can't say for sure, I think we still have some way to go, but at least we've made great steps forward. When I first started a blog in 2003, most people hadn't even heard of blogs. It surely looks amazing in hindsight, how far we have come in less than two decades.

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the

way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. For example, I would like to hope that, one day in the distant future, the cultural changes gradually brought on by technological development will end all wars once and for all.

Technological changes also affect the way we live and experience the world, and the ongoing story of technological progress can often be interwoven with anecdotes from people living through these changes, providing the human side to this otherwise very technical story. For example, my father recalls of a time when, to watch a football match, one would have to go to the local park and sit in front of its giant screen, as there were no televisions at home. I myself have always watched the world cup on TV, as it was more convenient, and nowadays my father and grandfather also do the same.

Similarly, my mother recalls the first few months of getting a black and white TV set back in the 1960s, she would stay glued to the screen until they ceased broadcast around midnight every day (TV stations didn't broadcast in the middle of the night until the 1990s, I can still remember TV Guides having the listing 'Close' back when I was very young). Surely, kids today have much more to look forward to than the TV. It just shows how life changes, and the most exciting things often become boring in a few decades' time.

Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most groundbreaking developments of all, in our times. Previous generations had different groundbreaking technology, but I believe none matches up to this. And it's interwoven with our own stories too, just like the generations who came before. For example, when I was doing my PhD, I reflected on the fact that we are so lucky to have access to almost any academic journal

we want online, and read any article from any issue with several clicks of the mouse.

Convenience surely is a major benefit of recent technological changes, and it's the dimension many people have focussed on thus far. But in my view, the ability of anyone to start having a cultural voice is the true revolution.

Before any of that convenience and cultural change became reality, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit *I Wish I Was a Punk Rocker* actually contained the line 'when computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to

control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven. Whilst I can understand why the aforementioned type of computer would be scary to many people (I tried to teach my mother who never understood any of it), for me, as a kid, it was better than any toy they had in the 90s.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the internet. Back then, internet speeds were really slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with

minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. But for 12-year-old me, it was amazing enough that I was reading what everyday people halfway across the world were saying. If I added something to a discussion, someone halfway across the world might read it while I was sleeping, and reply to it. Just this thought made the world seem like a less lonely place. The internet meant that the world had truly 'become one'.

And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was

almost an every week thing. Sad to say that, in the years since, the computers themselves had improved much more slowly, but then, it would be in this period that the 'real' revolution would begin.

The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological advances in the late 90s and talk of internet speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of

that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation), there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. One emerging use, the most groundbreaking in my opinion, was the ability to build a cultural platform, communicate with people, gain an audience, and do all of that independent of big media corporations' approval.

Independent musicians were one of the first groups to embrace this idea, sometimes by simply informing people where they would play at shows next, and sometimes even sharing their music via the internet, although the slow speeds meant this was usually of poor quality. It allowed them to connect with their fans and

build a following, in a way that mainstream media had denied them. Blogs, or weblogs, regularly updated webpages, were another phenomenon that raised its head around the turn of the century, and gradually spread from the geeks to the mainstream. It allowed people to have what is essentially a regular opinion column, something previously limited to cultural elites.

As a teenager I decided to be an independent musician, and as a semi-geek also saw the great opportunities the internet could provide in that regard. But I wasn't ready to make music yet, so that was still somewhere in the future.

However, a blog could be easily set up in under an hour, and blog posts would only take an hour or less out of each week, so it was a thing that you could start doing anytime you wanted.

Besides, I figured out that as a musician I would like people to really get to know me, as the artist behind the music is an important part of the music, so the blog would fit into my musical

plans neatly in the future. With that in mind, I started my blog in August 2003. It had a very basic design, and I posted every now and then, about everything from world affairs to celebrities to politics (that was how most personal blogs were back then). Of course, my blogs are more sophisticated today. But those few posts did mark the start of a long term habit.

Chapter 5. In Context: How Reality TV Changed The World

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series *The Hunger Games* was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critics who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and its appeal was two-fold: firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were trans. As a fan of many reality shows including the Idol franchise (Pop Idol, American Idol, Canadian Idol and Australian

Idol), Big Brother and Amazing Race amongst others, this dual appeal of both 'more ordinary' and 'less ordinary', both 'more relatable' and 'more interesting', was definitely a big factor in the interest.

While the internet became popular in the late 1990s and blogs were in widespread use by the mid 2000s, in reality, TV was still king during this period. There were two reasons for this: firstly, internet speeds were slow to begin with, and the situation only improved when 'broadband internet', which was typically 5-30 times faster than 'dial-up internet', became available.

Broadband internet was first available in the late 1990s, but it was very expensive back then, and even in well developed cities in developed countries, most people only gradually signed up to broadband in the following decade. For rural areas it was even slower. Whilst music and videos can be 'streamed' over dial-up connections, it was generally of very poor quality. For example, with music videos, the

sound may not be clear and crisp, and you may not even see the singer's face clearly. The popular video sharing site YouTube was not launched until 2005. In reality, there wouldn't be much point before that time anyway, when only relatively few people had broadband internet. Secondly, old habits die hard. To this day my parents still prefer to receive the news from the TV. Even as technology had enabled it, the sharing and viewing of multimedia content on the internet had to gradually grow year-by-year, until the point where many people would spend more time on the internet than in front of the TV (we only reached this point quite recently). For these two reasons, TV was still king until very recently.

But while TV was still king, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. Definitely not fast enough for people like myself, who were hoping to gain an audience solely using the internet. And of course it was an uphill battle. My website and blog had no

multimedia content in the mid 2000s, as having such content would make it unable to show for non-broadband users (i.e. the majority). It only had text and a few photos, like most websites back then. Certainly inadequate for introducing someone to the world. Today, the internet is an important, and sometimes the main, avenue of acquiring and connecting with audiences, for many artists, writers, musicians and culture creators, myself included. But back then, most websites had a more 'facilitating' purpose. In many cases, people who already knew about a certain show or a certain person would be able to find out more about them on their website, perhaps join a discussion on their 'message board'. Most audiences were not acquired via the internet, but the internet provided an opportunity for further information and connection, like finding out when a band would play near you.

While this wasn't the revolution people like myself were hoping for, it did change culture,

and more than what I felt at the time, looking back in hindsight. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on. Moreover, contestants were often able to gain an internet following from the 'fan clubs' that develop on the shows' website forums, some of which may transfer to their own websites once the show ends. In ways like these, reality TV was already showing the future of culture creation: where characters are real and approachable, and

where what comes next can be interactively shaped by the audience.

In conclusion, in an age where TV was still King, reality TV was at least the first step towards democratisation of culture, and it was for this reason that I and many others found it appealing. It was still imperfect in that the only 'cultural creators' that could participate were the dozen or so people the producers selected every year for each show, but that was at least better than having only celebrities approved by the cultural elites to select from. The future would be even more exciting, but we should be able to say that this was how the revolution started.

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite

celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. But this is not true, because even in the past, celebrity was often unearned and undeserved, and in my (and many others') opinion, many reality 'stars' were more deserving of recognition than their contemporary celebrities. Celebrities were like overlords because only they could have the aforementioned characteristics and nobody else could, but it was never really the case that they were the only ones who deserved to have those characteristics. It was more like that the elites only wanted to grant the scarce opportunity (under the old media) to have those characteristics to people with the right connections (and perhaps the right amount of money). It was only now that people began to realise that it was not only the rich, glamorous and famous that deserved to be looked up to.

That it was not only the musicians who received huge airplay who had the greatest talent. That it was not only talk show hosts who had the most interesting opinions on world issues. And so on.

Of course, all this also meant that an increasing number of young people believed they had what it takes to 'become famous', whatever it may mean (I hate using that term because it is ultimately vague and meaningless). Again, many traditionalists complained that reality TV made young people delusional about taking the quick path to getting rich via being a reality TV star, avoiding hard work. But I did not, and still do not believe this is the case at all. Aside from the fact that most reality TV stars don't make it rich (typically only the winner gets prize money), who said it was all about money anyway? Maybe the older generations really don't get us, but many people in my generation (myself included) do lots of things not for the money. In fact, we often actively do hard work, not seeking money in return, like how I did two

masters degrees and a PhD not expecting that it would increase my lifetime earnings, or like how all my other work, like this book (as well as all my other books, all my music, and my blogs), isn't aimed at making money at all either. We do things because we want to, because we have a passion about things. And I believe these young people were the same. They probably just wanted to contribute to our culture, to be a somebody rather than a nobody, to having a unique voice rather than to be taken for granted, and in that era where TV was still king and bloggers like myself often felt like they were screaming into thin air, reality TV surely sounded like a great opportunity (especially for those who didn't properly calculate the odds of getting selected by the producers, but that's another matter).

In fact, I believe it is in many people's nature that they want to be a 'somebody' with 'something to say to the world', rather than just another anonymous being. It was just that there

wasn't much opportunity for your average citizen to pursue this dream until recently. Many people therefore decided to put their energies to pursuits that would make them special in some other way, for example in my mother's case being one of the quite few Asian women who completed a university degree in her generation. But back in the 2000s reality TV seemed to offer an opening, and many young people understandably looked forward to it. Fast forward another ten years, the desire to compete in reality TV among young people seem to have declined substantially, because there appear to be much better prospects of achieving what they want via their independent efforts using the internet. And further proving my theory that it's not just about the money, today there are many great blogs and video channels out there, whose owners are putting lots of effort into, without making lots of money (it's hard to even make half an average income using blogs and videos in most cases).

The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example Idol rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the first gate. This infuriated many people time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. Personally, I admire great talent, especially in music. Even though I must admit that my singing probably isn't the best, in music I often actively seek out the best talent to listen to, rather than just taking whatever comes my way. But this doesn't mean that anything other than the best singing doesn't deserve popularity. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and

whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

Overall, I think that the changed attitudes to fame brought on by reality TV were not only a healthy change for our culture, but also paved way for the revolutions that were to come. This really deserves recognition in our cultural history.

II. CONFLICT, UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGE

Chapter 6. Meeting The 'Enemy'

On Overcoming Differences and Embracing Our Common Humanity

One thing that's great about reality TV is that you get to learn about, or even sort of identify with, people from diverse backgrounds, including people with worldviews and beliefs very different from your own. I think this is great for encouraging mutual understanding and respect, which should be of utmost importance in this day and age of division and polarization (I'm writing this in 2021, for historical reference). Understanding is the best way to resolve contentious issues, and trust me, I'm no stranger to having to get people to understand controversial things, being part of the LGBT community, which has continuously been at the forefront of the political faultlines in the Western world for at least as long as I have been alive.

You may remember the politics of 15 to 20 years ago as less polarized and healthier than what we have today. And in some ways it certainly was. But it was still very divisive, with strong opinions on both sides of many contentious issues. The big issues were the Iraq War (I was very opposed), the erosion of civil liberties in the name of counter-terrorism (also very opposed), and gay marriage (which I very much supported, and was very painfully aware that the majority opposed it). There were national elections in which these issues played an important role in the US, Australia, the UK and Canada in 2004-5, which meant the political and cultural landscape of 2005 was filled with a certain bitterness, even a certain resentment about the 'other side' among some people. Big city people vs country people. Religious people vs atheist or agnostic people. People with college degrees vs those without (which is so classist). People who lived in one region vs another. None of that is new at all, really.

Reality TV was perhaps the biggest unifier we had. Even back then, it was clear that one of the big reasons for people stereotyping and resenting people on the 'other side' was because they didn't know many of them. People were rapidly self-segregating, hanging out only with people who shared their views, because of factors like geography, education, occupation and cultural affiliations. But through reality TV, you got to meet and even identify with people who are likely to be on the 'other side', or at least live in the kind of context where many of those on the 'other side' live. It's like you get to sort of 'make friends' with someone from the 'other side', without having to move to a new city or town or otherwise uproot your whole world. I remember back then there was a book titled 'Conservatize Me', in which a liberal Democrat decided to move to a deep red part of America, to live life among the conservatives, in order to understand them better. Now, most people couldn't do that even if they wanted to, but reality TV provided a small piece of that experience.

And through seeing the humanity of those on the 'other side', I developed a certain empathy for them, and a wish to understand where they were coming from, to find common ground if possible. I saw that they were also people who had hopes and dreams, people who cared deeply about their families and communities, people just like myself in many ways, and I felt like the divides, no matter how big they seemed, could be overcome by our common humanity. Of course, the real work in understanding each other and bridging the divides is real, hard work that still needs to be done. But the will to do it has to be there in the first place. And that will comes from the recognition of our common humanity, and our many shared values, despite our many differences.

Fast forward to four or five years ago, to the divisive years of 2016-7, when passions flared up on both sides over events like the Brexit

referendum, the election of Donald Trump, and the Australian gay marriage plebiscite. Unlike a decade earlier, when people harbored some resentment of the other side but kept that expression firmly in check most of the time, this time some people were openly declaring and embracing their resentment towards the other side. I remember reading countless pieces about how every person who voted for Trump or Brexit must be racist in some way. I remember thinking to myself, how much lower humanity had sunk in just a decade, how much more judgmental, hateful and negative people had become in just a decade, and how sad that was. Perhaps it's because people don't watch as much reality TV anymore. Perhaps it's because the anti-reality TV 'intellectuals' had won after all, in their quest to equate reality TV with everything wrong in society. If the golden age of reality TV had a purpose, it was to bring us together. Perhaps what we need most, is a big revival of reality TV. Reality TV is not the problem, it's the solution.

Chapter 7. In Context: What Reality TV Taught Us

Is a piece of art (including literature, visual art, music and performance art) more valuable in and of itself, or in connection with the artist? I think that, while each piece of art has value in and of itself, most art would definitely be more valuable when viewed with a knowledge of its context. And to understand its context, you must first understand the artist, because ultimately, the context of the art is the context of the artist.

All of this appear to be far removed from the concept of reality TV, often described by self-appointed intellectuals as shallow and appealing to the 'lowest common denominator', in their own words. However, shallow or not, every piece of art or performance is ultimately a way to connect with the artist behind it. And that's why, even in popular culture, people are

more likely to appreciate music, books, TV shows and movies made by people they already know and appreciate. Each previous 'connection' makes the next one easier, and more appealing. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why works from established artists are much more popular than works from previously unheard of artists. In fact, it has been estimated that it takes on average 1.5 million dollars to break a new musician into the market, per country. That's about 30 times the average annual personal income! No wonder independent artists have it tough.

And in watching reality TV, this lesson applies too. In the first few episodes of each season, the show generally focusses on letting the audience learn about the characters. They can do this in a number of ways, for example showing pre-recorded interviews with every character, special short videos introducing a certain aspect of a contestant's life, or just via the free-flowing conversation between

participants. In the beginning, the audience essentially watches a dozen or so people they know nothing much about, and it's not that interesting, to be frank. But once you have learnt about the characters, the show starts to get interesting. It's also why most reality shows are only interesting if you start watching from the beginning, and there is generally no point to start watching in week five, unlike world cup football or the Olympics.

Many political commentators in the 2000s pointed out a similarity between politics and reality TV: that campaigns for presidential or prime ministerial elections have become like reality shows, where the candidates' every move is captured on TV for a few months, and many people simply vote for the person they 'like' best, based on what they see. Many intellectuals have despaired at the emphasis on 'likeability' rather than policies. Surely, the 2004 US elections, the first to be widely described like this, produced a result that neither the

aforementioned commentators or myself liked. But my thinking is more like this: if this is the way the world is, we better learn how to survive, rather than just sit and complain. Maybe it's just that first, you need to connect with the people, so they know what you are all about, in the big picture sense. Then we can start talking about policies.

For independent artists and culture creators like myself, this lesson also applies: you need to let people know who you are, exactly, before they can decide to like (or hate) you (you can try to do your best, but the choice is ultimately theirs), before they can really connect with what you say. With this in mind, I changed the direction of my blogging. Rather than just talking about random things, I decided that each blog post needed to tell my audience something about who I am, and what I am about (well, not strictly each and every post, but at least it should generally be this way). And unlike on television, many visitors to blogs are

first time arrivals, so you don't want people to get the wrong impression based on the first thing they see. Therefore, blog posts can't just be random. They have to represent the person behind the post. This is actually often trickier than it looks, easier said than done. The hot and angry culture wars of the early 21st century, in particular, makes things even more difficult in this aspect. There will be plenty of times I revisit this concept in following chapters, which will serve to illustrate this point.

Furthermore, reality TV highlighted the appeal of the 'real' over the 'fake', more so than any previous mass media phenomenon. As previously discussed, many people like and indeed sort of look up to reality TV characters because they are 'real'. Many celebrities like to say that they are 'real', but in fact, due to them being part of the mass media money making machine, and their need to bring monetary value to their financial backers if they want to keep their career going, they are often anything

but real. While there are indeed reality stars who also 'play the game' and do what they think people want to see them do, the nature of reality TV means that most such people are soon caught out by the audience. Unlike in the world of celebrities, there is nobody to cover for them. On the other hand, the 'real' people, who are often unglamorous, a bit unworldly, and often may not have the best talent, end up being among the most well liked.

Independent artists and cultural creators are in a similar situation to reality show contestants here. They can have the unique appeal of being 'real' that mass media celebrities cannot practically have, or they can be fake, and without a mass media machine to cover for them, they will soon be exposed for being fake. Due to reality shows only lasting for months but independent cultural careers (hopefully) lasting for decades, there really is even less scope to be fake than with reality shows. It is for this reason that, I believe, we must present ourselves as our

real selves, and not what we think others' want us to be, if we want to earn respect in the long run. It is for this reason that I have said some unpopular things, even knowing that they may be unpopular (the following chapters will visit some examples). If you truly believe in something, you can't hide it for too long.

Again, the culture war dynamics of the early 21st century means that saying unpopular things will almost certainly lose you fans and gain you critics, something I have experienced again and again personally. There's no denying the pain when people who once liked you decide to turn on you. But this has not reduced my resolve to stay real, because anything else just won't work.

If all you see is a limited picture of the world, then your opinions of the world aren't going to reflect what's really going on.

Most young people today, at least in most of the Western world, do not see being gay as a lifestyle choice. For most of us, this notion is ridiculous, and many of us indeed find it offensive. Why? Because we can see for ourselves, that this is clearly not the case. However, people who lived 100 years ago are much more likely to have believed that being gay was a lifestyle choice. Why? Were they stupid? No. Most of them just didn't know any gay people, as it was very dangerous to be openly gay. "The truth liberates us, so say it and embrace it," I like to say.

Mass media has tended to favour the conventional, both in terms of personalities and content. Television has long been criticised as having unnaturally low representation of ethnic minorities, for example. The reason is clear: mass media needs to appeal to the biggest group of audiences to make money, and that means appealing to their desire to see people

like them reflected in culture. Furthermore, the mass media machine will only create 'celebrities' they think they can reap financial rewards from, and therefore any celebrities they 'create' will be similarly catered exclusively to the majority. Therefore, in a world where mass media dominates and dictates culture, minority lives and voices are ignored.

In the reality TV genre, however, things were a bit different (though not totally opposite): while most participants were of the conventional type, they often include one or two less conventional characters, to make the viewing a bit more special. For example, the Big Brother franchise was often described by critics as a 'freak show'. However, the fact that a trans woman won British Big Brother 2004 did lead to at least some discussion and awareness around trans issues, about ten years before this issue gained widespread recognition. I also believe that the inclusion of geeks, politically involved people, socially shy people and ethnic

minorities who still embraced their own culture in reality shows also changed the widespread perception that these people were somehow 'less cool', which I can say was definitely the case around the turn of the century.

Reality TV showed the world for the first time that it's not the case that people are not interested in minorities and their lives; it was just that they had no way of getting to know and understand these lives. While mass media tended to be conservative in this regard, fearing financial loss otherwise, the people out there (especially young people) have shown the world that they are better than the elites thought of them. What's even more important is this gradually increasing awareness leading to changing attitudes. Unlike when I was in high school, nowadays it is cool to be different and unique. Of course it took more than reality TV, but it was personal stories and examples that changed attitudes. Knowing this has inspired my blogs and cultural commentary to include

discussion on news and other stories relating to minority lives. It is a crucial part of fighting against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry.

Chapter 8. Bridging the Divide

In recent years, it has often been said that the Western political landscape is sharply divided and polarized, and that this is unhealthy for our democracy. However, this trend has actually been happening for quite a while. Even when I was in college, there was plenty of divisiveness and tribalism. People were divided on the post-9/11 'war on terror', the Iraq War, and gay rights. This coincided with an increasingly sharp divide between those who were religious and 'traditional', versus those who were secular and 'progressive'. In turn, this often coincided with the places people lived in, rural vs urban, as well as geographical divides, particularly in North America. The 2004 US elections demonstrated these faultlines clearly, and there was commentary and debate across the Western world on division and polarization in the months following. As I said, none of this is new at all.

Of course, the dividing lines back then were somewhat different. While in recent years I tend to say that I am 'politically homeless', 'in the middle' (perhaps technically incorrect because I'm not a fencesitter), 'on neither side' or something like that, back then, I was clearly on one side and opposed to the other. I mean, if you had a libertarian concern about civil liberties, you opposed the Iraq War, you strongly supported gay marriage and was skeptical of the religious right, you clearly weren't going to be a fan of the George W. Bush brand of conservatism. And the other side, whatever that side was called, was mainly about opposing Bush and his counterparts in other Western countries. The 'left' back then was way less ideological, it was way more diverse, and there was sort of a libertarian bent to it. As such, I felt very comfortable being part of 'the left' back then, and I didn't feel 'politically homeless' or 'on neither side' like I do today.

Although I had a comfortable tribe to belong to back then, I was still uncomfortable with tribalism. However I disagree with the other side, however disappointed I was that we seemed to be on the losing side back then, I still wanted to reach out and understand the other side. (To this day, I still can't understand why most other people don't seem to share my attitude.) The problem was, you can't just walk up to a member of the other side and ask to talk. Firstly, that would be awkward. Secondly, most people probably wouldn't take up the offer. Finally, you probably can't identify a member of the 'other side' in the first place, because most people don't discuss politics with strangers. Luckily, there were plenty of books written by conservatives I could read. And helpfully, it was also the dawn of political blogs, i.e. regularly updated personal websites that focused on politics. The 2004 US election was widely credited with popularizing political blogs, a phenomenon that later declined with the rise of social media. I even set out to understand the

'religious right', the political faction that I was most frustrated with back then.

Let's be honest. Reading the other side isn't always nice. The disagreements were real, and, especially in the informal world of the blogosphere, insults were common. It wasn't uncommon for conservatives to call us liberals 'crazy airheads' or worse, and it was very common particularly for them to gloat about Bush's 2004 victory, rubbing the salt in where they can. The religious right was particularly difficult: the sheer amount of homophobic sentiment, plus Islamophobia, and even hostility towards followers of other religions sometimes (this category includes myself), as well as the overall apocalyptic negativity, made trying to understand them a matter of willpower. But through all this, I gained two things. Firstly, I learned to not be offended by differences or even personal attacks. Which is why, I suggest, the best way to cure what people like Jonathan Haidt call the 'coddling' of

the minds of young people is to simply encourage them to 'meet the enemy'. Secondly, I learned to think critically about my own views, having to mentally defend them from counter-arguments all the time. This also taught me that free speech leads to critical thinking, and sound ideas ultimately winning in the end. Finally, I learned to appreciate the common humanity people on the other side shared with people like myself. Meeting the enemy often results in the realization that, deep down inside, perhaps we ain't that different after all.

By seriously dealing with voices on the other side of the divide, rather than just stereotyping and making fun of them like many people did, I saw something that they didn't: mostly, these were good people, sincere about their values, wanting to make the world a better place like we do, just having a different view of what that would entail. They cared for their families and their communities, just like us. They were sincere about their wish to uphold family

values, and it's something that we could learn from them, despite our differences regarding where gay marriage fit into this (later on, British Prime Minister David Cameron would articulate a 'conservative case for gay marriage' that combined the best of family values and inclusion, which showed the two can indeed work hand in hand). Despite our bitter arguments on politics, there was still a common humanity we could embrace.

By trying to bridge the divide, I found our common ground, and learned a lot from people who I still had strong disagreements with. In today's highly charged political landscape, where some people seem to think meeting with the 'enemy' in any way is a betrayal, I highly recommend this approach. It will help everyone understand those with different views more, and see them more as worthy debate partners rather than hostile enemies.

I also came to understand that good people can, and often do, disagree on issues. And, at the end of the day, if we embrace our common humanity, we must see those with different views as equal in moral standing to us. After all, part of our common humanity is that we are all fallible human beings, trying to do what we think is the morally correct thing but not always getting it right. Given that there is nobody on Earth who can fairly judge who is right, I guess the only way to truly have peace, and truly respect each other's dignity, is to live and let live. Let us each do what we believe, let us each build and maintain our lives and communities using our own values, and let time and the results it brings be the judge as to who has the better ideas. My Moral Libertarian model was specifically designed to allow this to happen. As a moral absolutist, I do believe there is a right and wrong, but nobody on Earth can determine what is right for certain, so objective results are the only reliable judge as to what is the correct way. In the meanwhile, don't forget our common humanity. Remember that, despite

our differences, we still have a lot of common ground.

Chapter 9. In Context: The Religious Awakening That Never Was

The 2004 US elections was famed for the rise of so-called 'values voters'. Such a voting bloc were identified when pollsters asked people what they based their votes upon. Those who answered 'moral values' or something similar were categorised as 'values voters'. In truth, I believe people should vote with their values rather than their economic interests, unless such economic interests have to do with their basic survival. But the 'values voters' described were overwhelmingly conservative and religious, and conservatively religious, and largely voted for Republican President George W. Bush. Let me explain in detail.

In the aftermath of the 2004 US elections, analysts pointed to the new voting bloc of 'values voters', who they believed were ultimately crucial for carrying President Bush to

his second term. The 'values voters' were generally conservative, religious people, and had issues of religious morality high up on their priority list, chiefly abortion and 'gay marriage'. In fact, it was common to describe the beliefs of this crowd as 'God, guns and gays'. Analysis found that this bloc represented up to a quarter of the voting population, and would surely have made a difference in otherwise close elections like 2004. They were also found to have a high rate of turning up to vote. However, this finding was probably confounded by the fact that there were same-sex marriage referenda running at the same time as the federal elections in most states during 2004. I will come back to this later. But at the time, several commentators even said that America was perhaps experiencing another 'Great Religious Awakening', akin to previous ones that had, for example, inspired the prohibition.

In light of this 'finding', there was a renewed focus on the role of conservative religion in

politics. Everything from the way church groups would encourage their members to enrol to vote, to the way conservative talk-back radio and cable television was run, to the rise of new megachurches featuring pop music catering to young people, were analysed in detail. And it wasn't just in America. This widespread concern about the rise of the 'religious right' in politics was even felt in countries like Canada and Australia, where religion didn't traditionally influence politics, and religion was not thought to have affected the most recent elections.

As a young, committed libertarian-leaning liberal, I was of course horrified. While the young people I knew were not part of the 'religious right', media reports made it seem like that the 'religious right' were a large army, somewhere out there, ready to take over our culture. If even the 'adults' thought that it was true, then it must be true. Centuries of Enlightenment were about to come face-to-face

with a powerful force wanting to wipe it all away.

On the other hand, I became very interested in the organisation of the 'religious right', and wished that liberal forces could be similarly well-organised. Analysis of the religious right also highlighted the fact that their relatively strong families, relatively clean living lifestyle and idealistic and ambitious army of young people was part of what made them strong. I was thus inspired to start encouraging fellow liberals to start embracing a cultural agenda of strong morals, inclusive family values, and ambition to improve the world. I had always believed in such values personally, but now I understood that it was important for my fellow liberals to embrace them too. If we didn't want big government conservatism to take over, we must first be morally strong ourselves. To this day, all this remains an important part of my cultural message. Great Religious Awakening or not, these remain solid values for life.

But then, just a few years later, we started to find out that the Great Religious Awakening of the early 21st century probably just never was. The victory of Obama in 2008 was the first clue. Some commentators were prepared to say that the Republican Party would be kept in power by 'values voters' for a generation, but this surely didn't happen. As time went on, this was further confirmed. More and more celebrities came out in support of marriage equality. Surely that would mean the 'religious right' and their 'values' at least didn't have much clout among young people. By President Obama's second term, during which marriage equality support reached majority, it was clear that the Great Religious Awakening of 2004 simply never was. America, and indeed the rest of the Western world, was increasingly embracing marriage equality all this time, which was incompatible with the picture of a rising religious right. It was a figment of the media's imagination. It just goes to show how we can collectively imagine

and fear something that simply is not really happening.

But here's my theory for the whole phenomenon of the Great Religious Awakening that never was: Same-sex marriage, which wasn't even on most people's political radar in 2000, had emerged as a major election issue for the first time in 2004, due to decisions in its favour by the Massachusetts Supreme Court as well as several Canadian courts. Back then, not many people were passionate supporters of marriage equality, but many more were passionate opponents. The inclusion of ballot initiatives to 'ban gay marriage' naturally brought many opponents of marriage equality to the ballot box who wouldn't have otherwise voted, and most of this population was also likely to vote Republican, giving Bush an advantage. This, however, did not mean the religious right was on the rise, per se. This was also not able to be repeated even in the 2006 mid-term elections, because even though the

majority was still against same-sex marriage, the bans were already in place. Therefore, 'values voters' did not play much of a role in either 2006 or 2008. (The 2004 picture also could not happen in today's climate: the Irish referendum showed that, even where voting is voluntary, more supporters of marriage equality than opponents would turn up.)

Meanwhile, there was also a concurrent same-sex marriage debate in Canada, and of course the religious right participated in politics over this issue. In Australia, it was probably more of a case of the progressives simply losing confidence and fearing for the worst, after four consecutive terms of conservative government and a recent defeat at the 1999 Republic Referendum. Note that this phenomenon was not observed in the UK or New Zealand at all, let alone Europe. If it had been real, it would likely have spread to all countries of similar culture.

Chapter 10. It's A Matter Of Understanding

On What 'Coming Out' Means To Me

Let's go back to the idea that understanding is the key to resolving contentious issues. One of the best examples for that was gay marriage. Back when I was in college, only about 35% of people supported gay marriage in Western English speaking countries. Today, polls show that the figure is about twice that. It is clear that people can be persuaded to change their minds. The key is understanding. People used to think that gay marriage meant the end of the world, because, you know, family values would somehow be destroyed. The key to winning support was to convince people that this wouldn't be the case. And reality has proven that we were right: life simply went on after gay marriage became legal, and it is now legal in almost every single Western country. The fearmongering people were wrong, and rational reformists were right.

Using a more personal example, let's talk about coming out, i.e. telling people, especially family and friends, that you are gay or trans. And let's not mince words here: coming out is hard. I know it from personal experience. It is hard on yourself psychologically, and it is hard on the people around you too. Even if there is no rejection or bad experiences, these things are still very much true. I mean, I have heard people say that things have improved somewhat. It is certainly way less of a surprise (even if still quite a surprise) for someone to come out as trans today (2021) compared to back when I had to do it (2006). At least today trans issues are in the media all the time. Back in 2006, some people hadn't even heard of trans people! And most of the rest didn't know how to respond to it. Most people, including gay and lesbian people, simply hadn't met a trans person before, let alone know how to interact with them, back then. (Hint: just treat us like normal people! We're not fragile!)

I guess if there is a downside to coming out today, it's the rampant misinformation that's out there, partly as a consequence of the relentless culture wars being fought around trans issues. This simply wasn't an issue for us back then, and I sincerely hope that these culture wars will go away soon enough. I guess the way to make the culture wars go away is, again, understanding. Going back to gay marriage, it was one of the big culture war issues up until just less than a decade ago. What changed was that there was a genuine attempt to reach out, to build a consensus that marriage equality was simply a matter of decency and civil rights, and wouldn't threaten the social fabric at all. Building that understanding led to majority consensus in support of reform, and there wasn't much room for fearmongering anymore. As the 2015 referendum in Ireland and the 2017 'postal vote' in Australia demonstrated, it was a consensus that could withstand all the negative campaigns during a national public vote. Even with anti-gay

marriage ads on TV every day, 62% of people in both countries voted to support reform. Meanwhile, in the US, arguably the stronghold of the Western 'religious right', opposition to marriage equality simply collapsed in a matter of a few years. If trans issues can win the same kind of broad consensus, not only will we win trans rights, we will certainly not be subjected to culture war style fear campaigns anymore, which I think is the even more important issue for us right now.

I think there is a certain similarity between coming out to your own friends and family, and building a pro-LGBT (or at least pro-equality) consensus in the wider world out there. In both cases, you are taking people on a journey, sharing what you understand, sharing your own lived experiences, and trying to expand other people's views on some issues. The key is, they have to be willing to come on that journey with you. Just as when you come out, you would try your best to keep your own family and friends

on board, even if the process may be somewhat frustrating early on, you wouldn't want to alienate the larger public, in the process of building understanding and acceptance. Too many activists have forgotten this lately, and I think it's fueling a bit of backlash towards us, unfortunately.

Popular culture, media and personal stories have a role to play here too. The widespread understanding and acceptance of gay marriage couldn't have happened without the widespread support of celebrities, journalists and other public figures. These people showing their support, and most importantly, explaining why they decided to support marriage equality, were some of the most effective moments of the campaign. Unfortunately, trans issues are usually a bit more complex, require a bit more explanation, and this often has to be done by people who actually know the issues. This is why, in recent years, I have decided to speak up regularly about trans issues. You know, it was

quite uncomfortable at first. I had used to not talking about trans stuff for a decade by then, so it almost felt like some regression. But, just like my personal coming out process, I believe this has to be done, if we want a better future. So, I talk about trans issues regularly now. And it's like a 'second coming out' in many ways. Just as frustrating and difficult in many ways. But also just as necessary, and occasionally rewarding, in many ways.

Chapter 11. In Context: What It's Like to Join the Cultural Conversation

In an ideal form of cultural democratisation, people should be able to just say and do what they feel like, to join the cultural conversation. The world described in my novel *Eastlands Dreaming* is based on such an assumption. But the real world does not really work like this. Like it or not, as of 2021, mass media still controls the culture and what people are interested in to a great extent, and if you want to participate in the cultural conversation and remain relevant, you better talk about what others are talking about. Surely there will be some audience for a blog discussing the relevance of the French Revolution to today's world, but this audience is likely to be very limited, because frankly it won't be what many people are interested in, unless some mass media cultural icons decide to embrace the topic. There is a reason why many blogs out there discuss the same things: it's the same things that are dominating the news,

dominating people's conversations, and dominating people's cultural consciences. It's the same reason why so many musicians on YouTube would cover the same songs in the same month, which also always happen to be the songs in the top 5 of the charts. If they didn't do these covers, people wouldn't then listen to their originals.

But then, in a world where everyone talks about the same things, you have to have a unique angle if you want to stand out and be noticed. Taking the YouTube musician analogy a bit further, it's like how almost every cover of a song would be noticeably different from the next one in some way, and I'm not talking about just the different voices.

Unlike covers of chart hits, where the worst you can do is to cook up something boring or unappealing, in offering cultural opinion, if you say the wrong things, people can get really

offended. I really wish this weren't the case, but having been on the receiving side of this anger many times, I can assure you that I am not exaggerating. It is also getting worse. Having someone say that my worldview was of a 'naive airbrushed Disneyland fairytale' back in the 2000s almost sounds like a compliment compared to some of the name-calling out there today.

On the other hand, there are indeed rewards for taking a brave stand, on both major and even minor issues. In my personal experience, it is always rewarding to hear that someone really agrees with what you have said, or that someone has been inspired by your cultural vision, especially after receiving many less complimentary comments. What I do (and what other writers, commentators and artists do) is ultimately for the people who will appreciate it, not for the 'haters'. Moreover, if nobody ever took a brave stand on anything, not only would

the world cease to progress, it would be much more boring as well.

Furthermore, taking a brave stand may attract unexpected publicity, which may be a very good or very bad thing depending on each person's view. For example, numerous bloggers and vloggers (video bloggers) have attracted much publicity in mainstream media for their very personal and heartfelt support and defence of certain celebrities or politicians, often to irrational levels according to some people's opinions. (While it wouldn't be in my personality to behave this way, I don't think we should be as judgemental as the aforementioned people, as almost everyone has something they are really passionate about.)

And then there are the haters, which you can also sometimes call bullies. Actually, the two can be different. Haters are not always bullies. Haters can legitimately hate what you say, the

cultural vision that you represent, without an intent to bully you. People have hated what I said, and have told me bluntly so. This is not bullying, it's the way life just is, and I frankly prefer the world to stay this way rather than to turn into a world where everyone has to pretend to like everyone else. But there are also real 'bullies' too. There are people out there who spend their time on YouTube giving videos they see a thumbs down, for example. Some of the more extreme ones deliberately leave hurtful comments on the video page too. It is also known that there are people who would go to sites like Goodreads and deliberately give one-star ratings to independent authors, thinking it would hurt them most. In the more extreme cases, this type of bullying can even become like a group sport, where many people participate one after another, almost as if competing to see who can cause the most hurt. The most extreme case so far would have to be Rebecca Black's Friday music video (2011), which attracted probably millions of haters. There was really nothing to hate about the song

or the video - you may not like it, but any hateful reaction has to be bullying. I felt so disgusted by this episode back then.

So what should we do about bullies? I actually think that, apart from the medium used, nothing is really new. Politicians and mass media celebrities have been experiencing these things, and on much larger scale too. It's just that it was such an uncommon experience once upon a time, that our parents and teachers wouldn't have known it, and wouldn't have discussed it with us. Maybe it will be different with the next generation. Time will tell. But the thing is, nobody should care about them, because we do what we do for the people who appreciate us. I believe politicians and mass media celebrities, many of them who have more haters than fans, have actually always thought this way, and it's logical for them because no matter how many haters there are, it's only their fans that matter. It's also the logical attitude to have for any other participant

in cultural creation. Haters can't hurt you if you don't let them. It's not like in everyday life, where you don't want your colleagues to hate you because it would make your life hard, after all.

So this is what it generally feels like to 'join the cultural conversation' and thus also to open up yourself to potential criticism. Is it worth it? I think it is.

As was discussed in the previous section on reality TV, people are more likely to like, connect with, or even to look up to somebody when they feel they know that somebody. It's like how you often had to know your friends before you liked them. But for cultural artists, who only have a limited opportunity to connect with their audiences, this 'knowing' has to be done through several 'snapshots'. For mass media celebrities this would likely be via a

combination of interviews on television, radio and magazines. In the case of reality TV participants, this would likely be via a combination of what they do in the show, plus maybe specific short interviews or 'profiles' shown during the show. In any case, all you get are a series of snapshots, from which different people may infer different things about the person in question. It is partly due to this that the mass media machine tightly controls the 'images' of their celebrities, making them even faker. No wonder many celebrities complain that people 'think they know them but don't really know them'.

But even if you are an independent cultural artist, and your medium is the internet, there's no escaping this limitation. Whether somebody learns of you from your videos, your blog or other channels, what they still get is a series of snapshots, although arguably there's greater flexibility than the very limited and often strictly rationed television time allows. Still, people can,

and often do, think they know you from just several snapshots. And while some very 'stereotypical' or 'simple' personalities can indeed be constructed from such snapshots, in real life, people are more complex animals, with each person having a unique set of values and characteristics. But in a world where so many people are 'faking it' just to please their fans, many people seem to have forgotten this. Mass media celebrities have their image fine-tuned by their management, and they are generally told by their management to 'stick to the script', often being a stereotype that pleases their fans. While people generally can't act out a stereotype all the time, for mass media celebrities, any 'inconsistencies' can be ironed out without much difficulty using further mass-media-broadcasted interviews, promotions and activities, even 'third-party endorsements' from other celebrities. Some reality TV characters also try to act out stereotypes they think will earn them certain fanbases, including the religious, the rebellious, the 'down to Earth', the confident and fearless, the care-free, and so on,

and you see these types over and over again. (But then again, they only have to keep the act on for a few months, so it looks sort of realistic.) Mass media commentators and newspaper column writers also often try to maintain a stereotyped agenda in their commentary, lest they disappoint their audience and get fired. Therefore, most commentators are either very conservative, very progressive, or very libertarian, and there is almost no in-between or mix.

I have had my fair share of the experience of people forming positive opinions about me from a few snapshots, and then deciding that they don't like what I stand for after all several months later, and believe me, it is a disappointing blow for me (although to be fair, you could also say that I disappointed the other person too). In my case, the most common reason for this seems to be the perceived disconnect between my strong stance against racism, sexism and homophobia on one hand,

and my championing of cultural ideas and values I believe would support strong and stable families, on the other hand. I've even lost count of the number of times people have said things like 'I can't believe you're so conservative' to me, even though I have never voted for a socially conservative party ever. It seems like my strong support for LGBT rights and my 'just say no' stance to drugs, for example, just don't fit together for them, although this is not even logical. Another way I have disappointed people is through my libertarian leaning views on the relationship between politics and culture, i.e. that the government should stay out of it. I have disappointed conservatives by saying that the government shouldn't punish drug users, and I have disappointed progressives by saying that politicians shouldn't call their fellow citizens 'climate change denialists' just because they have a different view on this matter to us.

In fact, it appears that if you want to disappoint nobody, the best thing to do would just be to

choose a stereotype, stick to it, and 'fake it till you make it'. But I won't do this. Why? Firstly, because I don't believe in being fake, and actually I am uncomfortable about being fake. I am passionate about the things I am passionate about, and I don't think I can hide it. Secondly, as previously mentioned, people actually like 'real', even if some are still not very ready for what 'real' looks like after years of 'fake' coming from the mass media. But most importantly, I wouldn't want my name attached to anything that's not 'the real me'. I am a unique person. If you want the same old stereotypes, I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere. I know that at least some people like who I really am, and that's enough for me.

For the past few decades, the Western world has been engaged in one of its greatest culture wars ever. The two sides of this war are not exactly clearly defined, but everyone seems to agree that there are two sides. On one side are

the 'progressives', stereotypically people who support civil rights, people who are against discrimination based on race, gender and sexuality, people who want nationalism toned down so that we can all live in a peaceful world of global citizens, and often people who care quite a lot about the environment. On the other side are the 'conservatives', stereotypically people who want society to resemble the 1950s as much as possible, before all this began. I don't think it's a logical grouping let alone a logical 'war', and I believe one day in the future history will agree with me. But for now, this is apparently what we are stuck with.

The tone of politics is severely coloured by this idea of culture wars, and it has actually been 'forever this way' in the lifetime of my generation so far. Social issues are divided along culture war lines, very unhelpfully. For example, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples (which I strongly support) belong on the 'progressive' side, and efforts to address the

high divorce rate in society are generally seen to be on the 'conservative' side. Support for equal rights for women and minorities is 'progressive', while wanting abortion rates to be reduced, even if you don't want to ban it, is 'conservative'. The divide is quite strict in some people's minds, and if you don't want to upset people, you don't cross those lines.

The political landscape itself is also divided this way: in the US, the Democrats must almost always champion the 'progressive' side, and the Republicans must almost always champion the 'conservative' side, for example. Candidates running for the presidential nomination of these two parties generally learn to convert all their cultural stances to the stances of 'their side', even if they previously believed differently, because history has showed that more 'moderate' candidates don't do as well.

And it's not easy for other people to reject this culture war dynamic altogether either. Punishment is not only given to presidential candidates who don't 'toe the party line', it is also meted out to other politicians, celebrities, reality TV contestants and independent cultural artists alike. The most popular cultural icons almost always fall neatly into one side or the other of the culture wars, and those 'caught in the middle' are quite likely to suffer the horrible consequence of being rejected by both sides. Cultural war type attitudes also often factor into whether someone likes a certain cultural personality or not. For example, some people have advocated voting to eliminate reality TV contestants who don't support marriage equality. I for one can't see why you should do this. It's logical to vote out a politician who opposes marriage equality to get one step closer to marriage equality, I'm not sure how voting out someone on a reality show would do the same. People have also expressed disappointment at celebrities not sharing their political viewpoints. For example, many young,

progressive people have been disappointed to find out their favourite musician or celebrity is a Republican or would sometimes support Republican candidates. Politicians, mass media celebrities, reality TV personalities and independent icons alike who wish to cultivate a stereotyped image to please certain segments of the population, as previously discussed, must also toe the culture war lines to be successful. For example, to fit the religious stereotype one would have to oppose marriage equality, or at least allow people to assume that they hold this stance. (This appears to be changing slightly in the past few years; it has become slightly more acceptable to be religious and/or conservative and to support marriage equality. But at least up to 2012 it was quite 'unacceptable' to many people.)

My attitude towards this culture war and the 'dividing line' is clear: I wish it doesn't exist, and I'm not going to respect its existence either. Of course, as previously mentioned, I have

'disappointed' quite a few people because of this. But as human beings, and especially as agents of cultural change, we must stand up for our beliefs. I'm hopeful that there are still people out there who will see this as the right thing to do, and I also believe that in my rejection of the culture war divide I am setting an example for others who don't want to believe in the culture war but are still too afraid to speak up.

I don't believe in the culture wars because it divides people and gets nothing done. Using marriage equality as an example, the journey has been relatively easy in countries where the culture wars isn't a big thing (e.g. the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark). The same journey has been much more painful in countries like the US and Australia, where the culture wars are clearly in play over this issue. What I believe in is reaching out to people. Coming back to marriage equality, I even wrote a whole booklet arguing the case for marriage equality, directly

addressing all common conservative concerns I could find, and using their language as much as possible. Most 'progressives' wouldn't even seriously discuss these concerns, in contrast. But if you don't discuss things seriously, how can you hope to change people's minds?

Chapter 12. The Marketplace Opens Up On The Most Important Change Happening Around Us

As I said before, coming out was hard. During hard times, it is important to have hope about something, about anything, to keep you going. Luckily for me, the mid-to-late 2000s was full of hope in a way. Especially for aspiring cultural creators of all kinds, from musicians to comedians, from filmmakers to authors.

The mid-2000s was really the dawn of social media as we know it. Facebook and Twitter were launched and popularized in that period. MySpace, which dominated the landscape for a few years (yes, it used to be even more popular than Facebook), had a strong focus on independent musicians, and really kickstarted the trend of independent musicians promoting and selling their music online. To understand how revolutionary this was, you need to

remember that, just a few years prior, the only way to get music was to go to your local record store, to buy physical CDs. This effectively barred most independent artists from the marketplace of music, because there was no way we could get our music onto those shelves. There was no good way to promote your music to people who live far away from you either. It was in those years that this really changed, and those developments really encouraged myself, as well as countless other independent musicians, to keep making music.

But perhaps most importantly, YouTube launched in 2005, just as 'broadband internet' became standard, and it became possible to stream video from the internet as a result. Early YouTube was actually pretty low quality, but we didn't seem to notice it back then, probably because most people still watched analog TV, which was just as bad anyway. For the first time, there was a marketplace of video content. Prior to this, broadcasting was reserved for

established TV channels, backed by big money. As I said before, you needed to be 'the right kind of person', and to know the right people, to be invited onto that stage. But with the launch of YouTube, and several smaller video sites at around the same time, TV stations no longer had the monopoly on broadcasting. The change towards consuming online content was gradual, which meant that the transition from a closed ecosystem to an open market gradually happened over many years. Indeed, I would argue that it is still an ongoing process. There is still a long way to go for independent online content to be able to be fairly considered alongside content from big, established TV stations.

As I described previously, reality TV was the first glimpse into a future, where people without lots of money and/or special connections, and people who were previously excluded from mainstream culture, could become part of the culture making process. But social media took

this to a whole new level. Because even with reality TV, you had to audition to get in, and it is typical that only a very small proportion of people who audition get picked. Moreover, it was still the establishment media who picked the people who got to appear on their shows. In contrast, social media meant that the door was now wide open, to anyone who wanted to do a broadcast, and tell their story. This allowed the voices and stories of many minority groups, including the LGBT community, to receive widespread attention for the first time. It also allowed LGBT people to connect with each other and develop our own culture, including those who don't live in or near LGBT neighborhoods, like myself. The rise of social media changed the nature of the LGBT community, perhaps even more so than marriage equality or other legal reforms. It's also one of the biggest reasons why LGBT went mainstream.

Being an independent cultural creator comes with its own rewards: people who connect with your message, people who tell you they appreciate your work, and people who want to have a conversation with you in the comments section. It is these moments that keep you going. What I like most is that, unlike in traditional media, there are lots of opportunities for making a direct connection with the audience. This is why, I believe, this new media is the future of culture. It's where unscripted, interesting things are happening every day.

Chapter 13. In Context: The Dawn of the New Media Landscape

As previously discussed, in the 1990s, technology was mostly exciting in and of itself, due to the rapid release of new hardware and software. It was also exciting in that the rapid advancements and expected upcoming technology like broadband internet held the promise of a very different life compared to what we had back then. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the 2000s, the internet developed many new capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010, but they were an important part of internet

history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of updating and the page would remain the same for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked as simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because uploading them was time consuming, and for the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex, employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its

peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded

really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the need for a message board for some.

Independent artists, who often do not have access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people

who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile, however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do, both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented

such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great

talents this way, including many instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Mainstream media won't praise these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, people often settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to

actively capture the intense interest of niche populations.

Of course, this doesn't mean you cannot cater to more 'general' interests on the internet. For example, a lot of my work is designed for a 'general' audience, not for a particular niche, and I believe I have captured interest from a diverse range of people. However, large sections of the internet are dedicated to serving people of particular backgrounds or worldviews. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and other markets, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even 15 years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view

similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect. I will revisit this fact several times in the following chapters. Personally, I don't believe an echo-chamber effect is healthy, and I try to get my news from a diverse range of sources ideologically. As a cultural commentator, I believe this is the responsible thing to do, so that my commentary doesn't become part of the echo chamber.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared

culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions.

In fact, as long as you consciously widen your news sources to include a wide variety of viewpoints and ideologies, the age of narrowcasting allows you to explore and discover a richer mix of ideas. Fifteen years ago, when we got our news and commentary mainly from newspapers and television, the content discussed was likely to be limited to issues of interest to the mainstream, and the viewpoints offered, even if the coverage was balanced, would only include mainstream views. The mix of ideas I get from my 'news' nowadays is definitely richer because of narrowcasting, and I love it. This rich mix of ideas has also been a useful inspiration in writing my own commentary for my own audience, as it

provides me with an endless flow of new things to discuss and explore. The world is definitely a more interesting place than two decades ago.

Chapter 14. In Context: How 'Citizen Journalism' Changed Politics

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political biases, despite their claims of being neutral and

fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, YouTube channels, and even informal discussions between people on social networks.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total

audience received. Around this time, many commercial news websites also came of age, and in time, would rival mainstream newspapers in readership. Traditional newspapers, on the other hand, would begin to move online, and may even develop international versions that are only available online (e.g. The Guardian Australia). Overall, the effect was that there were more and more choices in terms of where you received your news and commentary, and the power of major news establishments was reduced considerably.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just

political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks.

In this new landscape, as a 'citizen journalist' or an 'online activist', you can potentially influence the outcome of political campaigns and elections by more than just your own vote. I believe it's therefore a big responsibility for anyone engaged in these activities to be well informed, as well as passionate about truth and justice.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct.

It was also noticed, even back in 2004, that conservative blogs only linked to other conservative blogs, and liberal blogs only linked to other liberal blogs. In fact, a study was conducted to prove this. Political blogs are generally highly ideological, and they generally wear their ideology like a badge of pride, unlike mass media outlets who often claim to be balanced. This is only natural, as blogs are a narrowcasting media, often catering to niche audiences rather than the 'general public' as a whole.

Despite this drawback, which I think time and the development of an even more diverse news blogosphere may be able to change, I still think that citizen journalism has been a force for good. At least, we are no longer limited by what mass media bosses want us to hear and think about.

Chapter 15. Reality Trumps All Theory

The problem with the way politics is practiced is that too many politicians are 'ideological', i.e. they rely on their own theory about what things work, rather than look at the reality of things. I guess the inherently antagonistic nature of parliamentary or congressional democracies, in which politics is inevitably divided into two major parties and further subfactions within, leads to an echo chamber effect in these factions and parties, which often allow theory to become dogma. Far too often, it is about proving our theory to be superior to the opposite side's theory.

In the 20 or so years that I have been paying attention to politics, I have seen plenty of examples of theory not working out in practice, with bad consequences. The Iraq War was actually a good example of this. Aside from the fact that the doctrine of 'pre-emptive strikes' is basically aggression and is hence inherently

immoral, the idea that such a policy would make the world safer has also been debunked by reality. In fact, the 2003 Iraq War ultimately made the world a more dangerous place, especially in the medium to long term.

However, I guess the biggest example of theory not translating well into reality is the kind of economic policy that ultimately led to the 2008-9 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Ever since the 1980s, the West, led by America and Britain, went on wave after wave of deregulation, cutting welfare spending, and privatization. These decisions were based on theoretical considerations, like a fundamental belief that 'the freer the market, the freer the people', rather than careful consideration of the actual consequences of these policies. Even before the GFC, many people had pointed out the economic strain these policies were having on working class families and communities, leading to increased family breakdown and social

problems. Ultimately, the GFC proved that these policies were inherently unsustainable.

Since the GFC, there has been a swing of the economic pendulum to the other side, and anti-market economy thinking has become mainstream throughout the Western Left again. It started out with calling out how 'market fundamentalism' led to the enrichment of the 1% at the expense of the 99%, but soon evolved into more extreme forms. Old school left-wing dogma, which blame the market economy for every imaginable social evil, is suddenly respectable again. Moreover, the mainstreaming of postmodern critical theories, like critical race theory, at about the same time, led to the market economy being blamed for things like racism too! I believe these developments are as fundamentally misguided as the market fundamentalism of a generation ago, because they are just as based on pure theory over actual reality.

This is why my idea of Moral Libertarianism is a fundamentally practical one, rather than a theoretical one. To judge whether an action or policy is good from a Moral Libertarian lens, the standard is whether it will lead to us getting closer to, or further away from, equal and maximum moral agency for every individual, in practice. Using this standard, both 1980s neoliberal market fundamentalism and the anti-market fundamentalism in the version of socialism championed by many in the Western Left today are bad ideas, because they ultimately lead to a movement away from equal moral agency among individuals. This is because market fundamentalism inevitably leads to economic hardship for working class individuals and families, while anti-market fundamentalism inevitably leads to centralized control and lack of individual choice, which effectively means tyranny of the majority in the best case scenario, or even dictatorship of a small elite in the worst case scenario.

In coming up with the aforementioned Moral Libertarian principle of equal and maximum moral agency for every individual, my wish was to preserve the good parts of conventional libertarianism, while getting rid of the dogmatic and impractical parts that has caused it to be an almost irrelevant movement up until now. Libertarianism is great because it is principled. Too many generic 'liberals', especially in America, have at least partially adopted inherently anti-liberal ideas like postmodernism and critical theory, because they only have a vague notion of needing to support social justice, rather than basing their politics on any form of classical liberal worldview. However, conventional libertarianism's core principle, the non-aggression policy (NAP), is too theoretical in that it does not examine the practical consequences of actions. It is therefore often hard to apply in real life, and could result in very impractical policies, depending on how it is interpreted. Moral Libertarianism has the principledness of conventional libertarianism, while still being rooted in practical reality.

The other thing is, liberalism, and our Western liberal democratic system more generally, was always meant to be rooted in practical reality. John Locke, the father of classical liberalism, was a man of science who was fundamentally committed to the truth, and he was also one of the great empirical thinkers of his time. Other classical liberal thinkers were similarly committed to truth, empiricism and practicality. Theirs was a principled political framework geared to encourage truth seeking in the real world. If we understand classical liberalism in this way, then neither the overly theoretical conventional libertarians, nor the vague and unprincipled mainstream 'liberals', sometimes also known as 'progressives', are worthy heirs of the classical liberal tradition. Moral Libertarianism is both principled and rooted in practical reality, and should be a worthy heir to the classical liberal tradition.

III. MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

Chapter 16. Clear Vision Make Strong Movements

In the time that I have been observing politics, many political movements have come and gone. The 2010s was perhaps the most politically heated period in the West since two generations ago, with multiple movements competing for attention at any time. And one thing I have observed is that movements with a clear purpose and plan tend to be much more successful than those without.

The movement I would rate as most successful has to be the gay marriage rights movement. This was a movement with a clear goal, and a clear plan to achieve it. The goal was simply to change the law so that two people of the same gender can get married, and the plan was to achieve this via the court system, representative democracy, or alternatively, referendum (which was generally not preferred

but preparations were always made for one). In turn, to make any of this possible, there was a broader plan of trying to change hearts and minds in the general public. As you can see, marriage equality advocates had a clear goal, as well as clear pathways to achieve that goal.

On the other hand, movements which have been objective failures are the 99% movement stemming from Occupy Wall Street, and the libertarian movement stemming from Ron Paul's 2012 Presidential run. The thing these movements had in common was that there wasn't a clear purpose, clear goals to achieve, or clear plans to achieve these goals. Standing up for the 99% was a vague aspiration. The different factions in the movement strongly disagreed on the details. Libertarian 'policy debates' were often more like fantasy football than real sport. In both cases, there was no clear consensus possible as to the 'thing to do next', beyond just talk. In both cases, this meant

the movement ultimately fizzled out relatively quickly.

I guess the lesson from all this is, for any movement to be successful, there must be a clear purpose, and clear goals that supporters can agree on and work towards. The problem with much of contemporary liberalism is that there is not enough of these things, outside of specific demands like gay marriage. Even self-identified liberals can't agree on what the purpose of liberalism ultimately is, as well as what goals we should pursue right here, right now, in the context of the early 21st century Western world. This is why liberalism has often become confused with fundamentally illiberal thinking lately. Left-leaning liberals have been influenced by anti-liberal schools of thought like postmodern and identity-based critical theory, which have a clear goal of challenging and supplanting liberalism itself. They can't even seem to differentiate between the liberal conception of social justice, vs the criticalist

one, even though the two are necessarily incompatible (i.e. what is just under criticism is going to be unjust under liberalism, and vice versa). Meanwhile, right-leaning libertarians have been influenced by what I call pseudo-libertarianism, where private property rights are used to justify an unlimited ability to exclude and discriminate, as long as it isn't being done by a centralized government. This line of thinking is very close to the far-right, and indeed, many pseudo-libertarians have actually jumped ship to the neoreaction movement or even the alt-right later on.

One of the reasons why I started writing about Moral Libertarianism was to give liberalism a clear purpose, and clear goals that can be practically worked towards. The overarching purpose is to eventually achieve 'equal and maximum moral agency for every individual'. Our plan is to get there by gradually moving towards that state in all areas of life. The application of this principle to tackling all sorts

of issues in front of us are our more immediate goals. This way, I hope liberalism can be given a new lease of life again, after many decades of confusion and stagnation.

Chapter 17. Everything in Life Starts With a Clear Purpose

Before we can successfully do anything, we need a clear purpose. We need to clearly determine what it is that we want to do, and how we are going to do it. In fact, finding a clear purpose is at the very core of the quarter life period's goals. Finding one's identity and values naturally go along with finding purpose, after all.

Looking at the broader picture, even on a social or political scale, movements with a clear purpose and clearly articulated goals are also much more likely to achieve their goals, compared with movements that have a vague purpose. In 2010s Western politics, an example of the former was the gay marriage movement, and an example of the latter was the 'opposing the 1% and standing up for the 99%' popularized by the Occupy Wall Street

movement. The marriage equality campaign had a very clear and precise goal, and it was achieved in most Western countries eventually. In contrast, the vague goal of opposing the 1% and standing up for the 99% came with no clearly agreed way to do that. There were ideas like campaign finance reform and ending corporate welfare, but even the details of these things couldn't be agreed upon within the movement itself. In other words, marriage equality was a clear goal, while opposing the 1% was just an aspiration that soon fizzled out.

Similarly, there was a libertarian wave during the mid-2010s. However, much of the 'goals' of libertarianism were not practical, or at least could not be practically accepted by enough voters at the next election, and there was no gradualist reform plan as a backup either. The movement got nowhere, and soon splintered into even more extreme factions like anarcho-capitalism. By 2016, the year of Trump and Brexit, libertarianism was already clearly on the

decline. One or two years later, practically nobody was still talking about libertarianism anymore. While libertarianism had some clearly stated 'goals', they were practically unachievable in the short to medium term, which meant they were actually no more than aspirations. And like all vague aspirations, it ultimately fizzled out.

From these examples, we can see the importance of having concrete goals, and not just vague aspirations. Too many people harbor vague aspirations of what they want to do one day, but do not develop concrete and achievable goals to turn these aspirations into reality, until it is too late. The 'quarter life crisis' is actually an opportunity to examine our aspirations and turn them into concrete goals, and it is good that we are having such crises in young adulthood, because there is still plenty of time to change course and pursue what we really want to do. We may have had vague aspirations to do certain things when we were

younger, or even some 'goals' that were based partly on our ignorance of how the real world operates. However, now that we know more about how the world really is, these aspirations may seem to be naive or impractical after all. At this point, we need to consciously re-examine our purpose, and develop the concrete goals that will help us achieve that purpose.

Using my own example, I have long been outspoken about various social and cultural issues, and I have long had a wish to do something, anything, to help make the world a better place in this regard. When I was younger, I thought that I would do that through music. However, through my twenties, I gradually realized the limitations of only focusing on music. Don't get me wrong, I'm still a musician, and I still like to make music. However, there are many things in the world that music itself simply cannot solve. Furthermore, through the years I saw the ugly side of the 'music industry'. I saw that it was not a meritocracy at all, and

that artists who really wanted to make it big needed to pander to the 'fashion of the day' sentiments, which are ultimately controlled by the elites of society, as well as big financial interests. Artists who 'make it big' often end up losing their own personality in the process. These realizations contributed to me plunging into a period of deep pessimism.

Eventually, I realized that, what I needed was new goals. New practical, concrete goals, that can fulfil my aspirations, that I can implement step-by-step. I realized that, if I wanted to help shape the culture for real, I needed to do so through the power of ideas. I needed to develop sound, evidence-based and hence convincing ideas. This meant I needed to become more of a 'humanities' intellectual. I needed to learn more history, politics, philosophy, sociology and psychology. I went out and bought books, including university textbooks, in these fields of study. I already had plenty of academic training in another field, so

it wasn't too difficult for me to learn these things over a period of years.

Soon I also realized that, to keep my ideas grounded in reality, to test my hypotheses in the real world, I also needed to join the cultural and political conversation, as it was happening. I realized that reading second hand accounts in newspapers and magazines often means you are one to three years late to the conversation, so I had to get used to following the conversation in real time, much of it internet-based. Which meant I had to get used to reading more things on a computer screen rather than in print. As you can see, working towards one goal often leads to new realizations, which come with new goals to work towards. It is all a fluid, continuously changing process, to a great extent.

Chapter 18. My Ways of Getting Clarity

The key to developing the concrete goals and step by step plans to achieve our big aspirations in life is to have clarity about what we really want. There are many ways to achieve clarity, including deep thinking, reading inspirational books, hearing the stories of other people, and even listening to music. (I highly recommend music as inspiration, being a musician after all.) However, one very useful thing I often do are 'life reviews'. It is an easy exercise that only requires a pen and some paper.

A life review begins with brainstorming. What things do I want out of life? What is missing from my life right now? And what barriers are there to me having those things? The next step is to explore, in-depth, every one of these points. For example, what can I do to achieve the thing I want? What can I do to remove the barriers in front of me? And what steps need to be taken to make the whole thing work? At the

end of the process, there should be a conclusion. What issues are there, overall? What things do I need to do, in the short term and the medium term, overall? And what are the priorities for right now?

Starting to do things is also a good way to gain some clarity. Sometimes, a goal can seem so big and daunting that you feel like procrastinating, putting it off forever. However, it is very important to make a start, even if it seems small. One may have big goals, but this can usually be broken into smaller steps. Moreover, even big developments ultimately start from small changes. This is true for both personal goals and social movements.

Furthermore, once you start actually putting your plans into practice, you will gain new insight, which will inevitably change your plans. Speaking from my own personal experience, it is pointless to develop detailed plans on

everything but not making a start at all, because plans that are not informed by experience are usually off the mark in important ways. It is like how big utopian plans for social change that are overly theoretical almost always fail in some significant way. Therefore, it is much more useful to have some initial plans, start small with those plans, and continue to develop and refine the plans as you go.

Chapter 19. Be Patient As Life Unfolds

Besides having clear plans and clear goals, another important thing to do is to simply be patient as it all unfolds. A related point is the need to be flexible enough to adapt with and even take advantage of the ever changing circumstances. After all, as the saying goes, change is the only constant in this world. And in the era we are living in, change is happening more and more quickly. And fear not, for change brings new opportunities, opportunities that you might not even be able to imagine before you see it.

In just the 35 years I have been in this world so far, so much has changed. This is especially true regarding media and culture. There was a time when the world was strictly divided between active cultural creators (which was really only people in the establishment media) and passive cultural consumers (everyone else). You had to go on TV or radio to get your message heard by

people other than your friends or family. You had to go through a publisher to get your book in front of readers. The opportunity to do either of these things were restricted to only a very small number of people. Even if you just wanted to share a brief thought with the rest of the world, like the equivalent of putting out a tweet today, the 'easiest' way to do that would be to submit a letter to the editor in a newspaper or magazine. Even then, only a handful of submitted letters get published every time. Participation in the cultural conversation was heavily restricted to less than 0.1% of the population. It might seem like a long time ago, but it was actually the world I grew up in. What we have now may have its problems, like the 'toxicity' of social media, but it's still a big improvement over what we used to have. Which is why, whenever I hear establishment elites complain about how social media is affecting our cultural and political discourse, I suspect that they are really unhappy about their privilege being reduced, deep down inside. Anyway, my point is, sometimes new

opportunities open up, due to technological shifts and/or cultural shifts, and they literally change everything.

There has also been plenty of social change. Coming out as LGBT was a big deal, until it was not. I remember when I did it, just 15 years ago, there was a lot of what I call 'lack of understanding'. It wasn't that people were bad about it, it was that they didn't know what to make of it. I know it's still far from perfect nowadays, but it's still easier to get your point across, at least. Also, gay marriage used to be a big deal, until it was not, and most people just accepted it as a normal part of life. Of course, what tends to be forgotten is that, these social changes have opened up new possibilities. What couldn't be done before can now be done. I have heard several stories about people who found it too hard to come out in the 1990s and 2000s, but were able to do it recently. Many gay couples, who were not able to have their relationship recognized with dignity by

society and the law, some who even had to keep their relationship a secret, have recently married late in life, doing what society denied them when they were younger. My point is, what you can't have today, you may still be able to have later on. Good things come to those who are patient. (Of course, this is not to deny the hard work of the advocates who made these changes happen in the first place. But patience is still required, right?)

Of course, the world is still quite imperfect. And sometimes, some things even get worse before they get better. However, we have to remember it is always a 'still evolving' situation. If some things are possible today which weren't possible in the 1990s, then there will be plenty of opportunities available in the future that we simply can't even imagine today. This is why, in planning for our goals, we must be open to the availability of even better opportunities down the line. More importantly, even if there are goals or aspirations which we can't find a clear

pathway towards achieving right now, we don't necessarily have to give up on those. I think, given the always changing nature of society, technology and the opportunities on offer, we should just keep those hopes on hold, and keep looking out for potential relevant opportunities.

The other important thing is, while we do have to live our lives in the moment, which is set in a particular place and time, with its particular issues and challenges, I think we should not lose sight of the broader picture. As the saying goes, 'this too shall pass', and we should not assume that conditions will stay like this for the rest of our lives. Whatever barriers are in front of us today, including barriers that may look insurmountable, they could be gone just like that. Whatever frustrations we have today, they could be irrelevant tomorrow. The people we consider friends or enemies today, that may not matter anymore tomorrow. Therefore, I think we should not let our worldview be colored too much by what difficulties we are facing today.

Because this will only make us inflexible,
unadaptive, and unable to take advantage of
new opportunities as they come. In life, it is
always those who can adapt that win in the end.

Chapter 20. It's A Matter Of Understanding - And Patience

On Being Patient About Change and the Need For A Long Term Strategy

Let's return to my previous point that understanding is the key to resolving contentious issues. I think I should add something more to that: understanding and patience is the key. To create understanding, you are essentially taking other people on a journey of exploration and discovery, and that takes time. At the personal level, this is reflected in many coming out stories of LGBT people, where their families often take several years or more to fully understand and accept them. A similar thing, perhaps on an even longer time scale, is only to be expected when you are bringing the general public on board this journey.

Talking about the marriage equality campaign again, one thing that I didn't understand back then, but have since come to understand and accept, is that it just takes time, sometimes. I mean, the arguments for gay marriage was as valid in 2004 as they are now. I could see that there wasn't a single valid (secular) argument against gay marriage, even back then, which made me sort of angry that other people couldn't see it. Moreover, gay marriage wasn't against traditional values and family values at all. If anything, it extended those values into the LGBT community, and revitalized the idea and institution of marriage for a whole new generation, hopefully just in time to rescue the falling marriage rates (among straight people). Indeed, my point was eventually taken up by some conservatives, most notably former British Prime Minister David Cameron, who famously said that he supported gay marriage not despite being a conservative, but because he was a conservative.

So what took everyone so long to come onboard? Perhaps it just takes time. If you look at history, every bit of social change took plenty of time, even if it made perfect sense in hindsight. In fact, marriage equality was perhaps the most rapidly successful reform campaign in the whole of Western history, having only lasted about one generation from beginning to end. For more complicated matters, we should expect even more time, perhaps two generations at least, if not more. Coming up with sound arguments are only half the work; the other half requires lots of patience. Even if the arguments are perfectly valid, change will have to take its time.

Looking at the bigger picture, the world improves bit by bit, through the dreams and aspirations, hard work and innovation, of countless people over the years. It is these small changes that add up to the big changes eventually. This pattern applies whether we are talking about technological advancement, civil

rights, or cultural change. For example, the popularization of the internet (1990s) led to the rise of social media (2000s). This, in turn, gave rise to open platforms for independent music, books and streaming video (2000s to early-2010s). Reality TV (2000s) led to people getting used to the idea of watching non-establishment and non-celebrity content creators. The two trends combined to create the revolutionary change I call 'cultural democratization' (2010s onwards), which I believe is just beginning at this stage. As to where it will go, only time will tell, but it's likely to go into directions we can't even imagine right now. Of course, when you are living through it all, it feels frustratingly slow. But in the whole picture of history, it looks much more satisfying. And this is what we have got to remember, especially in times of frustration.

One important change over the past 10 years or so is the open embrace of LGBT issues by mainstream media and popular culture. On one

hand, it's good from a representational perspective. However, on the other hand, the messages of support are often shallow and cliché, and in some cases, might even have contributed to moments of backlash against us. This, in turn, is because there is still only limited understanding of many of our issues among the general public, including celebrities. It's why, ultimately, we can't rely on celebrities to take the general public on the journey towards understanding. Instead, we must be the ones who steer this ship. We must use the opportunities presented by the aforementioned 'cultural democratization' revolution to make our voices heard, and tell our stories. And we must remember, this is almost certainly going to be a long ride. So we should commit to doing this for the long term. Too many content creators come onto the scene with a lot of interesting stuff, only to burn out within 2-3 years. We clearly need a more long term strategy. One that keeps people engaged and interested, one that keeps the conversation pleasant and healthy for the years and decades

to come, and one that can take advantage of whatever new opportunities the ongoing 'cultural democratization' revolution will present to us in the future.

Chapter 21. In Context: Civil Rights and Marriage Equality

I believe the 2010s will be remembered as a great step forward for civil rights in general. The 2000s will likely not have such a great reputation, but in my opinion, it was where it all started. My view of this history is of course also the backbone of my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels.

Some background first. The 1980s and 1990s were more 'materialistic' decades, where, for many people, making money took priority over civil rights. Things started to change in the 2000s. In 2003, the War In Iraq inspired an anti-war protest movement, the size of which was not seen in decades. When, in 2016, a British government inquiry found against the justification of the war, many people who were bitterly opposed to the war, myself included, felt vindicated. In the 2004 US elections, while

every age group above 30 clearly showed a majority voting Republican, a clear majority of under-30s voted Democratic. Some commentators pointed out to a new generation, 'generation Y' or the 'millennials', starting to enter the voting population meant that young people's priorities had changed. Others were even more optimistic, saying that in just one decade's time there would be much progress on issues such as marriage equality. They turned out to be right, even though in 2004 most people were sceptical, seeing that more than 30 states had just voted to 'ban gay marriage'.

The effects of this change in priorities for younger voters continued to be felt throughout the next decade. In 2008, young people voted in huge numbers for Presidential candidate Barack Obama, first in Democratic primaries, then in the general election, pulling off a victory that seemed unlikely at both levels just one year previously. The chance to make history by electing the first black president was an

attractive prospect for many, but even more attractive was his promise of 'hope and change'. By the 2010s, young voters' preoccupation with civil rights issues continued to change politics. By 2016, it was acknowledged by many commentators that the anti-marriage-equality Republican party now faced a demographic crisis in terms of votes, simply because it turned off too many young people and minorities. Meanwhile, in the Australian election of the same year, a survey of young voters found that their top three priorities were asylum seeker rights, marriage equality and climate change action. Some commentators even argued that perhaps we cannot get young people to care about issues like the economy without first resolving the aforementioned issues.

The political landscape also appears to be undergoing a historic shift, with the 'left' becoming increasingly left on both social and economic issues. Since 2016, many observers have pointed out that the current platforms of

the centre-left parties in the US, UK and Australia are the furthest to the left they had been for a while, perhaps since the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. On the other hand, libertarianism is increasingly replacing conservatism as the dominant ideology of young people on the right. For example, young supporters of right-wing parties generally have no problem with marriage equality, and the younger generation of pro-lifers often don't support actually making laws to punish abortion out of existence. This has not been picked up generally by the media yet, but I can sense that it is definitely happening in my generation.

One of the main effects of this shift is that the younger generation is more anti-war than ever before. For example, when former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott tried to drum up patriotism and fear to use the 'ISIS and terrorism' issue to improve his poor position in the opinion polls, there was barely an effect. Commentators wondered why this 'old trick' no

longer worked. But look closer at the age group breakdowns in the polls, and you will see that there was indeed a surge of support for the government among those over 60. It was just cancelled out by the massive drop in support in under-35s. Young people were turned off massively. This makes sense, as both new-left socialism and libertarianism are generally anti-war.

Looking back, many of the civil rights battles of the 2010s wave actually started in the 2000s or even the 1990s. Most symbolic of the new wave of civil rights in the 2000s and the 2010s was the issue of marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. The issue first came to political prominence in 1993, when a lesbian couple sued in Hawaii for marriage-like benefits. However, in the 1990s, the vast majority of people were decidedly against the idea - an opinion poll in 1996 found only 17% support across the US. The Netherlands, on the other hand, soon became the first country to legalise

marriage equality, which came into effect in 2001. By 2003-4, when the issue first received substantial political support in the English-speaking world, over 30% of the US, UK and Australia now supported marriage equality, but still, in November 2004, more than 30 US states simultaneously passed by referendum bans on state recognition of same-sex marriages. 'Progressives' and 'conservatives' started to argue about the issue seriously, with the same old arguments to be repeated over and over again throughout the next decade and more. (I played my part by writing a book addressed specifically to conservatives and put the case for marriage equality by addressing every major conservative argument I could find.)

Early successes with marriage equality often came with fears the legislation may be overturned in the future, and same-sex couples either chose to marry at the first instance they were able to, or would rather wait until the legislation was settled. Canada passed marriage

equality in 2005, but the Liberal government lost office soon after. Luckily, the next parliament attempted to re-open the issue but did not have enough numbers to do so. Similarly, there was concern about whether the election of a conservative government in Spain in 2009 would lead to a re-examination of the issue. Luckily, this too had not come to pass. On the other hand, although the Californian Supreme Court legalised marriage equality in mid-2008, a referendum (the famous Proposition 8 or 'Prop 8') invalidated this by November. Existing marriages continued to be valid, but no more same-sex marriages could be performed until the ban was revoked by the US Supreme Court in 2013. I still remember the dismay at reading the news that Californian authorities had stopped issuing marriage licences to same-sex couples that day in early November 2008. On the other hand, the fact that this happened in California, centre of the global entertainment industry, meant that many celebrities came out in support of marriage equality and against 'Prop 8'. The high profile

'No H8' photography campaign, in which celebrities were photographed with their mouths taped as protest, even lasted for quite a few years.

As a new decade arrived, things began to look better. By 2012, both UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama had announced their support for marriage equality, although things would still take a few years to change on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, many people were baffled by then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's unwillingness to support marriage equality, especially as she was an atheist and otherwise socially progressive. She later explained that she was affected by anti-marriage attitudes prevalent amongst 1980s feminists (she changed her position in 2015). Her explanation actually led to quite a few older-generation gay and lesbian people to come out and suggest that she had a point. I don't have figures to prove this, but in my own

experience, marriage equality is a generational thing, and even young heterosexuals are actually more likely than older gay and lesbian people to support and be passionate about marriage equality.

As time went on, the support for marriage equality continued to grow. Before 2012, the pro-equality side lost every referendum ever held on the subject. The November 2012 successes in Maryland and Washington state, both by 52-48, were groundbreaking enough. But the 2015 Irish referendum, with its 62% approval rate, surely was much better, and this was later equalled by the Australian Postal Vote in 2017, with 'yes' also winning 62%. By then, polls had also generally found majority support across the US.

Furthermore, passion for the issue continued to grow, with a poll conducted during the 2016 Australian elections finding that 49% of

Australians were 'strongly opposed to the idea of marriage between only a man and a woman', making marriage equality the second most passionately supported election issue overall. This matches my own experience. For a decade, my passion for marriage equality was generally a thing my friends couldn't understand. They were generally fine with it, but couldn't understand the fuss. But more recently, I have met more and more people who are equally as passionate about this cause as I am.

Chapter 22. Utopian Plans Lead To Disasters

As I said before, I had been strongly opposed to the 2003 Iraq War since the beginning. I knew all that talk about 'spreading freedom' and 'making the world safer' wouldn't actually happen, at the very least. But by 2014, even I was shocked about how bad things had gotten. Vast areas of the Middle East were completely destabilized, and the people living there were suffering immensely. We who lived in the West were also increasingly worried about our own safety, due to the increasing terrorist attacks. Judging from this angle, the Bush administration's decision to launch the Iraq War must have been one of the worst ideas in recent history.

Yet, looking back, there was indeed a substantial proportion of the general public, as well as some policy experts and public

intellectuals, who enthusiastically supported the war. They bought all that marketing about 'spreading freedom' and 'making the world safer', for some reason. I believe that, without their support, the Bush administration and its allies would have been much more likely to be pressured into reconsidering their plans. Therefore, their support was crucial to this monumental error going ahead in the first place. By now, many of these war supporters have publicly said they were wrong. They have little choice, if they want to maintain their reputations, given how history has played out. I believe all humans are fallible, and people should be forgiven for bad judgements. However, the important thing is that we learn from this episode, and make sure history does not repeat itself. After all, some have pointed out that, if the West had truly learned its lessons from the Vietnam War, the Iraq War wouldn't have happened at all.

I believe that, by now, it should be clear that the West minding its own business, and taking a non-interventionist approach to the rest of the world as much as possible, is the best principle to maintain, to avoid mistakes like Vietnam and Iraq happening again in the future. There are many arguments for peace and non-intervention, ranging from world peace, to mutual respect of sovereignty, to saving money to spend on social programs at home. However, it is clear that these arguments did not convince the kind of people who enthusiastically supported the Iraq War, and other similarly distant conflicts before it, and we need something else to convince them. So let me make another case to these people: utopian plans don't work, because context matters. This would be a 'conservative case against intervention'.

Indeed, given that most of those who supported the Iraq War were on the political Right, they should understand this very basic principle of

the conservative worldview: that a society, its values, and its institutions are the product of centuries of evolution, and that a society cannot be separated from its history, values and customs abruptly without ill effects. Knowing this, then, one should know that a Western-led attempt to intervene in a non-Western culture, with an aim of imposing Western liberal democracy there, can only ultimately lead to bad outcomes. As a result of this realization, in recent years, I have had a personal principle of not commenting on non-Western politics. My political conscience has been entirely formed by Western politics, informed by Western values, events in the West, and circumstances that apply to the West. Based on the empirical scientific principle of not applying the observed data outside of its range of validity, I honestly cannot say that my values and principles are applicable outside the West at all. The other thing is, I don't know enough about the actual situation there, I haven't always been following their history and politics, and I don't know their culture and political context well enough either,

so I'm not in any position to make a constructive comment. End of story. If more people maintained this principle, the West wouldn't be getting into so many foreign wars, which would be a great outcome in and of itself.

Instead of having utopian dreams of spreading liberal democracy (especially by force, how ironic) to foreign countries, we in the West can focus on shoring up liberal democratic values in the West. Classical liberal values are facing their greatest challenge in the West since at least World War II, with the rise of various identity politics movements on both the Left and the Right, and anti-liberal political philosophies like postmodernism and the identity-based critical theories. Of particular concern is that these philosophies all aim to erode the principle of individual moral responsibility, which has been at the core of Western civilization since at least the Enlightenment. Liberal democracy clearly needs a stronger defense, in the context of the West itself. We should focus on saving liberal

democracy in the West. This will give us plenty of work to do for many years to come.

Chapter 23. The Long Arc Of History

On Having Faith in The Conscience Of Humanity

If we need to be patient about social change and reform, we need to have faith in the process. We need to have faith that free speech, rational debate and gradually negotiated change will lead to justice winning in the long run. And that faith should be rooted in a study of history, especially the history of the post-Enlightenment West. As the saying goes, the long arc of history bends towards justice. Although this saying is pretty cliché by now, it remains objectively true. The history of liberal reform since the Enlightenment has brought us democracy, universal suffrage (expanded on the basis of class, race and gender during different periods), civil rights, workers' rights, and more. And it is clearly still an ongoing process.

I only came to appreciate the 'long arc of history' at work during my late 20s, when I

realized that the causes I was passionate about in college, the causes I decided to support at 16, had already won the moral argument. The most prominent of those causes were to declare the 2003 Iraq War a mistake, and marriage equality for gay couples. One was to right a wrong, so as to prevent it from happening again (as much as possible), and the other was a civil right reform, to create a new legal right for the sake of social justice. Back in 2004, we were clearly on the losing side, in terms of both causes. US President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Australian Prime Minister John Howard all won resounding victories after their role in the Iraq War, while gay marriage was banned by referendum in many US states, often by very large margins. In the trans community, there were literally people who feared that openly being trans was going to be banned next, in a similar way. There was even fear that the West was turning into an authoritarian theocracy ruled by 'fundamentalist' Christians, where those who don't abide by their rules are treated like

second class citizens, and this theocracy could harbor a permanent religiously motivated hostility towards the Islamic world, marked by endless conflicts like Iraq. At that point, I was almost certain that the West was entering a new dark ages, where the forces of hate, violence and injustice were going to prevail all the time, where reason would never win because people simply wouldn't give it a chance. Of course, a decade or so later, I realized I had it all wrong. I was merely too impatient for history to play out.

It is easy for young people, especially those who come of age in relatively troubled times, to harbor an unjustifiably negative view of the society around them, and reject faith in free speech and rational debate leading to just outcomes. This really amounts to a rejection of faith in the conscience of humanity collectively. Trust me, I know how it feels, because I've been there too. But what makes my 2000s-era college-age experience different from your

typical college-age political experience of today, is that the many radical academic theories that reinforce this negative view of the world had not been popularized and mainstreamed to the same extent yet. These theories have a long history. They were originally invented by politicized academics who were traumatized by experiences relating to World War II and fascism, or otherwise unhappy that their ideal politics did not gain popular support in the post-war West. They were then further developed by other radical academics, whose anger at society reflected the prevailing racism, sexism and homophobia of their time. Ironically, it is only in recent years, when things have already improved quite a lot, that these theories have gone mainstream. I am worried that the high availability of these theories and worldviews are further biasing today's young adults towards negative thinking, and resorting to us-vs-them approaches to political differences. I am worried that it is creating unnecessary anguish among young people, and even encouraging a mistaken

and counterproductive victim mentality among women and minorities.

When you are young, you only have a few years of in-depth social and political experience to draw from. If those few years are marked by deep conflicts, governments making unjust political decisions, and voters mistakenly rewarding bad actors, it is easy to develop a dark view of society. If there are relentless attacks on your own civil rights and your own dignity, as is often the case with LGBT people unfortunately, it is even easier to develop a dark view of humanity. However, as you gain a more long-term view, as you see people change their minds over time, some of which may be a direct result of your own work of persuasion. As you see real improvement and resolution of issues over time, you regain that faith in humanity. I hope the younger generation (often called Generation Z) can listen to our stories, and develop a stronger faith in the process of free and rational debate leading to the side of justice

winning. The long arc of history indeed bends towards justice. I know because I have seen it myself.

IV. THE HARDER PARTS OF LIFE

Chapter 24. It's Not Always A Meritocracy

Now, let's get to one of the hardest things I have to say in this book: it's not always a meritocracy. Let's face it: even in the 21st century Western world, it's not always those who have the best talent, those who come up with the best ideas, or work the hardest, who get the biggest prizes in life. Things like money and connections still matter, and they perhaps still matter more than anything else, even in our society today. It's simply a matter of fact. We may wish society to be fairer, we may even put in some effort to make it fairer, but at the moment, it really ain't so fair yet. Equality of opportunity is a major aspiration, on which society has moved forward quite a bit in the past two centuries, but there is still a long way to go.

Unfortunately, part of growing up is to know this truth, and to come to terms, and make peace with, this fact. Not everyone who is good

at computers and programming can start the next Facebook: you need to have the connections to get the investment in the first place. Not everyone who is good at music can be the next big thing in the music industry: you probably need to come from a rich family too. And not everyone who has interesting ideas and great analyses can be an award winning journalist: you need to know the right people and be able to get yourself into one of the big name newspapers or magazines first. In most cases at least, no amount of hard work or preparation can overcome these barriers. And these are just a few examples. Many people hit this realization some time in their twenties. One doesn't even need to be particularly ambitious to hit this realization: there are similar background-based barriers no matter what career you want, from politicians, to lawyers, to screenwriters, just to name a few. Now, this may seem like a depressing realization, but it is also a liberating one. At least you don't have to compare yourself to those few people who have

made it by 25. They probably have some kind of unfair advantage over you.

Indeed, understanding that it's not always a meritocracy provides the foundation to seeing where there could be an uneven playing field, so we can advocate for change. For example, I have tried to point out that Wikipedia's Notability Criteria, which essentially prevents entries being created on most people and ideas that haven't been extensively covered by mainstream media, leads to a biased coverage of the ideas and arguments out there, which in turn contributes to an uneven playing field in the free market of ideas. This would also clearly be a bias in favor of the elite establishment's preferred ideas, because they alone control the mainstream media, and what ideas get coverage there. People who argue against my view often say that Wikipedia is simply reflecting reality as it is, and Wikipedia articles have to be 'earned', whatever that means. The implications behind what these people are

saying is essentially that ideas which receive mainstream media coverage are more sound. This can only be because they don't understand, or at least are not conscious enough of the fact, that it is not always a meritocracy. This example shows the importance of understanding that it's not a meritocracy, if we are to effectively advocate for a fair playing field in many areas of life.

Of course, the other thing we all need to do is to at least sort of make peace with the fact that it's not always a meritocracy. Indeed, I think that one of the often under-discussed aspects of a 'quarter life crisis' is the difficult process some people have with making peace with this fact. Some people may ask, if the playing field is unfair, is there still meaning in striving to do better? I think this doubt is ultimately rooted in having a view of life as a competition. The important thing is to stop thinking of life as a competition. Instead, think of life as a mission. Find your purpose and work towards that

purpose. While life may not always be fair, there are usually still plenty of opportunities to do what you need to do to work towards your purpose, whatever that might be. The journey might be long, and you might have it harder than some other people, but it will also be meaningful and productive. I believe that, if we find our purpose, and work towards that, we will be able to live life with no regrets. Even if the world is unfair.

Chapter 25. Expect the Unexpected

One thing we have to be mindful of, at all times, is to expect the unexpected. I have had enough unexpected things happen in my life to know this. What it means is that our plans must be flexible enough, and that we can't really be sure that what looks to be 'settled' is indeed 'settled' for all time.

The biggest example of 'expect the unexpected' for me has to be the mainstreaming of trans issues, ever since the so-called 'trans tipping point' back in 2014-15. When I was younger, I always thought that being trans was an entirely private thing, that the rest of the world would never understand anyway. When I first came out, people told me that it could take 100 years for the world to finally understand trans people, and I actually agreed with them. For a long time, trans issues existed in a bubble that belonged solely to the trans community, and were largely separated from the rest of the world. There was

a kind of safety, and even a sense of security for trans people, in that we wouldn't be subject to the same kind of public debate that gay people were facing during the gay marriage debate.

This safety net gradually evaporated after the 'trans tipping point', an event which was celebrated by progressive intellectuals. I remember many trans people actually having mixed and conflicted feelings about the 'trans tipping point', which mainstream media neglected to mention at all. Suddenly, we were at the center of one of the hottest culture wars of Western politics. I remember thinking to myself, what did I do to deserve this. I mean, I had long been a good ally on gay marriage, I was not racist or bigoted in any way, and I was never one to stoke the fire of the culture wars. I clearly did not deserve to be engulfed by a culture war that I did not choose to be involved in.

However we felt, we, the trans community, now had to learn to live with the new reality, where non-trans people would join our conversation and even use us as political footballs. It was something we neither chose nor expected. But we had to adapt, in either case, if just to survive. In the years ahead, I saw our formerly more united and peaceful community splinter and diverge in interesting but also tragic ways, as different people adapted to the changing circumstances differently.

The 'trans tipping point' made me realize two things: firstly, even the most basic assumptions you have of the world around you can change relatively suddenly, and leave you scrambling to regain your understanding of reality. Secondly, external events beyond your control can have a fundamental impact on your identity, your plans for life, and the way you relate to the world, and it can hit you where you least expect it. The impact these realizations had on me was the kind of impact that you really have to

experience first-hand to understand. I mean, I haven't actually lived through a war, a revolution or anything as upsetting to one's world as that, but I guess this has got to be at least similar in some way.

How does one keep their sanity when their world is being torn apart, and one can't control or even negotiate with the process? For me, the answer is in my values and my purpose. In a blurry and changing world, my values and my purpose are still clear, stable and strong. They are the only reliable constants in a world where nothing can be assured to be 'settled' for good. By always staying true to my values, and not giving up on my purpose and goals in life, there is something to hold on tight to, even as the world keeps spinning around.

Chapter 26. The Political Winds Suddenly Shifted

Ever since my college days, I have believed in a vision of society advancing through gradual reforms that, bit by bit, increase the level of liberty and equality enjoyed by its citizens. Reforms like gay marriage are the building blocks of this long-term vision, just like the reforms of legal racial equality, equal education and employment opportunities for women, and women's suffrage that came before. Bit by bit, we are getting more free and equal, and things are getting better for previously marginalized minorities over time. I strongly believe we should continue on this track going forward.

For several years in the early-to-mid 2010s, I thought that things were definitely getting better. There was a reactionary phase during the 2000s, during which many people supported restricting civil rights and even going

to unnecessary wars due to a fear of terrorism. At the same time, the Religious Right successfully caused a moral panic over the gay marriage issue. However, these sentiments seemed to have died down across the West by the early 2010s, in favor rational debate over moral panic, and in favor of a more liberal or libertarian approach to various issues. I remember feeling that the West was on the right track again.

However, I began noticing a big shift in the political winds, especially in, but not limited to, the 'Left' or 'progressive' side of politics. There was an increasingly us-vs-them adversarial approach, defined on identity grounds like race, gender, sexual orientation and so on. People were being divided into privileged vs historically marginalized, or even oppressor vs oppressed, based on these immutable characteristics. There was an increased focus on historical events, as if the current generation must pay for the sins of people in the past, equality in the

here and now be damned. Most concerning for a committed liberal like myself was the trend towards trashing our most cherished Enlightenment values: there was a blatant disregard for free speech, and even a disrespect for the scientific method and objectivity in the most extreme cases.

I was particularly concerned about what I saw in the LGBT community. The shift towards this new worldview was particularly marked among my fellow LGBT people, where the sentiment that mainstream society was out to oppress us became increasingly prevalent. Ideas like how speech could be equated with violence and how 'safety' required suppressing speech or even excluding people based on political views became the commonly accepted view. You have to remember that, all this was happening even as gay marriage was winning in more and more places, which certainly didn't make sense to me. I was also very worried that this hostile attitude could put gay marriage reform at risk in the

places where there was substantial progress but hadn't been won yet back then, like Australia and some European countries. Looking back, this worry could be clearly seen in my writing in the mid-2010s, including the short novels I wrote back then.

During the period of 2014 to 2017, the rapid shift in political winds, especially on the Left, left me feeling very worried, which eventually led me to discovering the truth about why things were changing so rapidly, and what we could do to turn the ship around before it's too late. This will be the theme of the next few chapters. But this sudden and unexpected shift also highlighted something important for me: the world can take unexpected turns for the worse at any time, even when things appeared to be going well. That's why we need to strongly hold onto our values at all times. When chaos and setbacks come, only our values will keep us grounded in our response. This is the reason why we must be absolutely clear about our

fundamental values and principles at all times,
and not just have vague sentiments or
aspirations about what we believe in.

Chapter 27. Political Currents Are A Long Term Thing

One thing that struck me about the recent changes on the Left was that, in some ways at least, they looked like a return to the radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. During that period of Western history, progressive activists took a very confrontational and radical approach to social change, attacking everything from white picket fence nuclear families to the liberal social contract. Of course, not everything was exactly like how it was back then. For example, the division of people into oppressors vs oppressed based on immutable characteristics appeared to be new, and I couldn't find any period of Western history in which similar ideas were prevalent. Besides, the 1960s New Left was at least famous for the 'free speech movement', something the 2010s New Left unfortunately don't share. Therefore, in many ways, the 2010s New Left is even more problematic than the 1960s New Left. But there are definitely

similarities in the anger, negativity, and anti-everything attitude.

The thing to remember about the radicalism of the 1960s and 70s was that they directly led to the reactionary conservatism of the following three decades. The strikes that almost paralyzed the economy invited austerity, de-unionization, and the suite of reforms generally known as 'neoliberalism'. The challenge to family values and religious sensitivities led to a resurgence in conservative Christianity, which became a political force in its own right for the first time in a long time. The increase in family breakdowns led to a deep suspicion towards even moderate reforms like gay marriage. The increase in crime due to the chaotic circumstances led to 'tough on crime' legislation, mandating long prison sentences across the board, which eventually led to huge increases in incarceration rates, particularly among some racial minorities. I personally grew up during this long backlash, and only saw the

Western world return to the road of liberal reform when I was in my 20s. I really didn't want to risk society going through all that again. So why would some 'progressive activists' still favor the 60s and 70s approach, despite the disastrous consequences it brought? Especially just as liberal reformism was showing great promise?

I only got my answer to that question after digging much deeper, and learning the theory and motivations that were driving the 2010s New Left radicalism. Basically, what we are seeing now is the result of many decades of historical developments. It really is a long story. The root of the ideologies that drove the 2010s radicalism, as well as the 1960s radicalism before it, were originally developed in the early-to-mid 20th century by academics and intellectuals in the Western far-left, who were frustrated with how Western politics had turned out during their lifetime (i.e. reform won over revolution), and the welfare capitalist society

that enjoyed strong support among workers and elites alike in the post-war West. Their work was intended to critique, challenge and essentially overturn that society, and the liberal social contract underlying it. Hence, in these 'New Left' ideas, there is an inherently negative attitude towards pursuing reformist progress within the liberal democratic system. In the 1960s and 70s, students who were frustrated with the Vietnam War, the lack of progress on civil rights and women's rights were drawn to these ideas. Many of them in turn became influential activists and thinkers. During the backlash years of the 1980s to 2000s, the New Left continued to develop their ideas even as the mainstream were not paying attention, adding in influences from French postmodernism and identity politics. Eventually, these ideas also went mainstream and caused the radical wave of the 2010s. The problem for us is, radical activists in both waves are/were ardently opposed to liberal reformism, even if the evidence is that it brings good results. They insist on going with their confrontational

approach, even if it risks massive backlash and reaction.

Learning about the context that gave rise to the 2010s New Left radicalism made me realize something: that the development, trajectory, interactions and effects of political currents are a long-term, intergenerational thing. There really is no such thing as the 'end of history', even if we only look at the West. Political thought currents may rise and fall at different time points based on the circumstances of the time, which they may be able to take advantage of or not, but such currents, once established, are generally with us for many generations. Moreover, those committed to a certain political thought current do not easily give up on it even if their ideas have been rejected by society, and disproved by objective evidence. Instead, we should just expect these disproven ideas to be repackaged in another form, and potentially rise again some time in the future.

Looking at the broader picture, this continuous rise and fall and interactions of various currents also means that there is never going to be an established social consensus that can last for anything more than a generation or two. The social consensus is hence a matter of ongoing negotiation and renegotiation all the time, continuously shaped by the rising and falling political currents at any time. This observation means that we can't assume the values currently favored by the social consensus will always stay favored. It means that, if we cherish parts of the current social consensus of Western democracies, such as free speech, rational debate, and a respect for objective and scientific truth, we need to continuously stand up for and justify these ideas, in the face of new issues and new debates. Conversely, it also means that if these values have lost ground, like they seem to have in certain intellectual and cultural circles in recent years, that ground could be regained with enough determination and focus. This is why I believe liberalism can be fully revived in the West if we inject it with

enough 'life force', to make people passionate about liberal values once again. My Moral Libertarian work is about helping that to happen, by promoting a morality-based case for liberal values, and highlight how such values are linked to core principles of the post-Enlightenment Western moral system.

Chapter 28. Don't Just Look At The Surface

One thing about how people, including prominent journalists and public intellectuals, are reacting to the recent shifts towards illiberalism in parts of the Left, is that they too often react to what is on the surface, without digging deeper and truly understanding the phenomenon. This means that they often propose maladaptive solutions, that both actually cause harm to people, and further encourage the illiberal faction of the Left. We need to remember that what are dealing with is a worldview and ideology that have deep academic roots. It had developed over multiple generations, with influences from multiple schools of thought from multiple countries (mainly France, Germany, Britain, America). We need to acknowledge that we are dealing with a very complex system of philosophy (theory) and activism (practice). Postmodern criticalism is certainly much more complicated than liberalism itself, or other ideologies that we are

familiar with, like conservatism or socialism. This means that a complete and thorough understanding is needed, if we want to respond effectively to this challenge.

Let's take the example of LGBT rights. I am, of course, deeply saddened and frustrated that the illiberal postmodern criticalists have basically targeted our community as a site of practice for their ideology. I am frustrated that they keep speaking for us, saying how 'the relationship between gender and genetic sex is a matter for philosophy, not science, to establish', when the clinical medical evidence for the validity of trans people has been well established for many decades. This only serves to confuse people, and frustrate the progress towards understanding, acceptance, and trans rights reforms. I am truly worried about the impact this ideology will have on our future. I'm doing my best to challenge this narrative and re-center the experience of people experiencing gender dysphoria (which accounts for at least

the vast majority of trans people), but I'm not too confident about where this is going to go in the future, especially given that postmodernist activists seem to have better access to mainstream media than us at the moment. (Again, this seems to be mostly because mainstream media journalists don't have a deep enough understanding about what is actually going on in the trans community.)

Sadly, some people seem to have identified trans people, or even the whole LGBT community, as being a creation of postmodern identity politics, and hence they see us as the enemy, just for being ourselves. During the debate on gay marriage, especially in the lead-up to the Australian vote (where every Australian got a yes/no vote on gay marriage), some people said they were going to vote 'no' just because the illiberal Left was supporting it. They seem to have the misguided view that, if they force LGBT people back into the closet, the postmodern ideology would be defeated.

However, this not only has the cruel effect of harming people in real life (everyone needs to remember that these are real lives we are talking about), it could also have the opposite effect. Supporting oppression of LGBT people can only push more of them into the arms of the illiberal Left. Besides, even if the LGBT community disappeared overnight, postmodernism and criticalism will still exist. These ideologies were invented long before LGBT issues went mainstream, by mostly straight academics. If the LGBT community didn't exist, postmodernist activists would just find another group to use to practice their agenda.

The other thing many people still don't understand is that, criticalism is all about conflict, and the practice of postmodern critical theories relies on creating and encouraging conflict. Therefore, you can't fight criticalism by opposing everything criticalists seem to support. Doing so actually means you are

playing your part in their plan. Moreover, what criticalists appear to want is also sometimes deceptive. Revisiting the aforementioned example about gay marriage, all the criticalists I have ever met were basically not keen on the legal reform of gay marriage itself. Within LGBT politics, it was always the liberal and moderate reformist faction, along with the smaller conservative faction, that have been most passionate about gay marriage. In contrast, the criticalist faction has long decried that marriage is a 'bourgeois institution' we shouldn't be focusing on, and that for some reason only middle-class white cis gay men would benefit from marriage equality (which is of course totally wrong, but notice the heavy emphasis on identity divisions there). The reason why the criticalist faction appeared to be loudly shouting about gay marriage was basically to pick a fight with the (non-LGBT) conservatives who opposed it. Indeed, in trying to pick a fight, criticalist activists sometimes did things that risked harming the cause itself, like 'cancelling' anti-gay marriage people, which led to backlash

against the marriage equality movement. But like I said, they don't really care about harming gay marriage itself. It is the fight they want. (It was indeed this fact that woke me up to the harms of criticalism in the first place.)

Knowing all this, the most effective way to stop the postmodern criticalism agenda is to discourage conflict along lines of immutable identity characteristics like race, gender and LGBT status as much as possible. This is where the Moral Libertarian principle comes in very useful. It provides a framework to allow rational debate on an equal playing field, that completely discounts identity characteristics. I believe it is important that we insist everyone participate in debates about issues from a pure-merit angle. That is, all arguments should be considered solely based on their merit, and one should leave their identity, as well as their political affiliations (but not necessarily their values) behind in considering each argument. This ideal is actually somewhat similar to John

Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment, where people are called upon to imagine society without knowing their identity in that society. Rawls actually thought that this would lead to much fairer policies for disadvantaged and marginalized minorities, and I completely agree. This could well be used as an effective alternative model for social justice, to attract people away from postmodern criticalism.

Chapter 29. What Is Settled Isn't Settled

All the changes that have happened during my lifetime so far, including the rapid evolution of technology and the resultant changes to the media and cultural landscape, the ever shifting political winds, and most profoundly for me, the 'trans tipping point' and its effects, have taught me one important lesson: that what appears to be settled isn't really settled for all time.

Something may appear to be final or unchanging right now, only for it to be history in a few years' time.

On one hand, this could be an unsettling realization. As human beings, we crave security, stability, and above all, certainty. The fact that nothing is ever really 'settled' makes us uneasy. However, there are actually two sides to this coin. It also means that, if we don't like the reality we face now, there is always the prospect of change for the better. It's like how a political party that suffered a profound election

loss could come back to win big in a few years' time. Even referendum are reversible in not-too-long timeframes, with changes of public opinion, as gay marriage demonstrated.

Similarly, if we feel like we made the wrong choice on something, there is no need for regret, because the effects are likely not so permanent. In particular, young adults often fear that the choices they make will define them for the rest of their lives, which means they must make the correct choice now. This is often what leads to the paralysis of the 'quarter life crisis'. However, what we should remember is that, most choices we make in our 20s or even 30s are not so irreversible, especially when you look at the longer term, because things are not settled forever.

Chapter 30. The Journey That Brought Me To Embrace Positivity

On The Benefits Of Relentless Positivity

One thing I have become quite concerned about is the recent trend towards more negative thinking in the LGBT community. As I have described elsewhere, I believe this is due to the mainstreaming of certain academic theories. I strongly believe that this change is very unhelpful for us. Let me explain.

Countless books, from *The Power Of Positive Thinking* in the 1950s, to *The Secret* much more recently, have highlighted how important positive thinking is for people who want to achieve their life goals. This is also consistent with what we know from cognitive psychology. It is clear that having a generally negative view of the society around you, or having a persistent victim mentality, is only going to be self-defeating. Furthermore, the benefits of positive

thinking are not limited to the personal. History has shown that, LGBT people and other minorities have won the most progress towards acceptance during times when we presented a positive face to the world. One of the reasons why the marriage equality movement was so successful was because its positivity resonated with people. On the other hand, the recent turn towards negativity has brought considerable backlash to LGBT reforms. It is a clear sign that we should turn back to positivity. As the saying goes, you catch more flies with honey.

Given the overwhelming evidence in favor of positivity being good for both personal and social goals, I am unapologetically for positive thinking, and against negative thinking. I am for being relentlessly positive. It doesn't mean that I am always capable of living up to this ideal. I do have moments of doubt and negativity from time to time. But I consciously try to embrace the positive, and reject the negative. This is why I sometimes call myself a 'popstar'. Not because

I am shallow or highly commercialized or anything like that. But because I try to be relentlessly positive as much as possible, just like pop music. 'Pop' in this sense is like the musical genre, and is sugary sweet and positive. Think of the 'pop trolls' in the recent Trolls movie, if you like. (I sometimes think in terms of musical genres because I am a musician. You might like to substitute other metaphors, if music is not your thing.) I believe that it is precisely this kind of unapologetic positivity that will lead us to a better future, in the end.

To be trans in 2021 is to be surrounded by endless negativity. According to some of our activist 'leaders', many people out there are 'transphobic' and should be boycotted or even deplatformed. Furthermore, refusing to use our preferred pronouns is seen as an 'act of violence' against trans people. Now, I honestly feel disappointed when I hear that people don't support certain trans rights reforms, and I certainly feel a bit hurt if I am being deliberately

misgendered. But I rather choose not to focus on these things, or let them color my view of the society around me. I'd rather stay positive, because I know it's better for me, and it's better for our future too.

Ultimately, deep down inside, I also know that positivity works because of the journey that I have been on, the things that I have seen, and the truths that I have learned. I know that the 'enemy' is not that different. I know that differences are often a product of misunderstanding, and that creating mutual understanding, as well as having the patience to see it happen, is the key. I know that new opportunities open up all the time for people who are positive and open minded enough to embrace them. I know that the heart of humanity is ultimately good, which means that the long arc of history will ultimately bend towards justice, given enough exploration, dialogue and debate. Given what I have learned about people and societies, I am very confident

that positivity will work wonders for us.
Therefore, while some academic theories may paint an overly negative picture of the world, I know that ultimately, we who embrace positive thinking are more correct than them.

Chapter 31. In Context: Political Passions in the Early 21st Century West

Back in the 1990s, the world wasn't as political as it is now. Even university students were routinely described as 'apolitical', especially compared with their 1960s and 70s counterparts. The War in Iraq in 2003 changed things a bit, but by and large young people in the West were still not very passionately political throughout the 2000s. Those older than us lamented a loss of political activism, and even some in our generation, myself included, wondered if our culture could have more of a focus on social change, as it was in the 1960s, for example. I remember watching the *Hairspray* movie in 2007, wondering if a similar fusion of culture and civil rights causes could happen again. After all, even back then the majority of young people supported marriage equality, they just weren't passionate enough about it. It was this thought that led me to introduce political discussions in my popular

culture blogs, and even weave political ideals and civil rights issues into posts about popular culture and the entertainment scene. It definitely wasn't very common to do this, back then.

But then, things changed. I don't know what exactly caused the change, or what exact moment the change began, but bit by bit, young people became increasingly politicised. Maybe it started with the Occupy Wall Street movement, a response to the 2008-9 global financial crisis. Maybe the election of the first black US President caused a renewed interest in civil rights. Maybe the passion for marriage equality also played a part. Maybe the new online media, much of it having a political tone and actively appealing to young people, sparked a change in attitudes. But it seemed that, for the first time since the 1970s, young people and their culture were political again. And you could see it in popular culture too. Mass media celebrities started to come out in favour of

various causes. Marriage equality was perhaps the most popular one to support, and almost everyone supported this cause. But other issues like climate change, racism and refugee rights also got plenty of attention in Hollywood itself.

It would appear that the times have suited my own approach to culture. After all, if the world were to stay apolitical, there would be limited ability to introduce political discussions in popular culture discussions. At best it might bore people, and at worst politically charged topics might be seen as unfit for polite discussion (the typical 'never discuss religion and politics' attitude). And indeed, I am happy that we now have a much better chance to discuss political subjects close to our heart. But in a classic case of 'be careful of what you wish for', it hasn't turned out entirely like I hoped it would.

It appears to me that, in this brave new world of political passion, there is now more 'peer pressure' to conform your views to your peer group, your audience's wishes, or what people in general would expect of you. While people are much more comfortable to discuss politics openly now, they seem to be very uncomfortable with contrary views. Maybe the decades of culture war had conditioned people to be this way, or maybe the new narrowcasting media has meant an increased echo chamber effect. Alternatively, several decades of excluding politics from popular cultural discussions has meant that people are now unprepared for controversy.

The new politicisation of culture combined with the diverse and narrowcasting nature of the new media has meant that there is a new diversity of political opinions and persuasions. Of concern to many is the increasing number of people who are aligning with the extreme-left

or far-right across the West. But more interesting are the people who lie in between the extremes, and who may still have an atypical set of beliefs overall.

How many political persuasions are there, really? Traditionally, people and political parties could be divided into progressives on the left, conservatives on the right, and moderates in the middle. More recently, a two-dimensional diagram with two axes, one running from libertarian to authoritarian and another running from progressive to conservative, has been often used, for example in the libertarians' favourite 'the world's smallest political quiz'. An alternative would be to have economic issues on one axis, and social issues on the other, like the 'political compass'. But in my opinion, neither of these models can accurately reflect the diverse range of opinions out there, in the new media. Even if two people are approximately at the same position in the chart, they can still differ substantially in their political

outlook. This is because everyone has a unique worldview, based on their values, beliefs and unique experiences.

I like to think of everyone as having a 'political profile', almost like a personality profile. And such profiles can be complex. For example, my profile would consist of a strong belief in the value of liberty and the government's actions being consistent with the most liberty, distributed consistently with equal treatment. It would also have a strong focus on eliminating historical injustices and prejudices, like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination. Finally, it would have a focus on upholding family values and the traditional cultural structures that make our families and society happy, but using adaptive and liberal means. The aforementioned values, in conjunction with my previous practical experiences of the world, would then determine my position on various issues. I think most

people are not that different, except that they would have different values and experiences.

This kind of model predicts, and is indeed able to explain, the diversity of political views out there. For example, think about somebody who is very 'progressive', an atheist, a dedicated feminist and not homophobic either, but who wouldn't support marriage equality. While I would respectfully disagree with her, I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that she is faking her beliefs, like some of my friends may do. The traditional feminist position of refusing to support anything to do with marriage, for example, could play a strong role in her 'political profile', especially if she was once active in the feminist movement in the 1980s or earlier. And indeed, I have met many people whose political views are 'more unusual', like the aforementioned case. If you take time to understand their 'political profile', it usually all makes sense, even if you can't agree with it personally.

Chapter 32. You Can't Defeat Negativity With Negativity

Faced with the persistent negativity and often unreasonable stances of postmodern criticalist activists, there have been a variety of responses, from political withdrawal due to exhaustion, to intellectual analysis (I'm in this camp), to outright reaction. However, especially in the earlier stages, the reactionary component was quite dominant. This led to an essentially 'fight negativity with negativity' approach, heaping negativity on postmodern criticalism driven activism, without offering much in terms of an alternative positive agenda. The thing we must remember about this reactionary strategy is that it was not only unsuccessful in turning the tide against illiberal forms of activism, it actually pushed more people into their arms. I saw all this unfold right before my eyes, and I have become very frustrated about it, to be honest.

So why was the reactionary strategy so ineffective? The thing we must remember is that, you can't fight negativity with more negativity. Negative thinking is the domain of criticism, because it seeks to tear down society as it exists. Positive thinking is the domain of liberalism, because it has always sought to improve on the society we have. By dragging ourselves down to the same level of negativity as the criticalists, we end up validating their negativity, and make their approach look better than ours. This is why, by 2020, illiberal forms of activism were stronger than ever, with liberal reformism seen as ineffective by many young adults. I guess, if negativity is the only game in town, many people would choose to go with being negative about everything, which is what criticism ultimately is. Indeed, as I previously illustrated, much of postmodern criticalist activism is about encouraging conflict, so if you fight them with negativity, you actually participate in their plot!

A good example of the reactionary strategy was the 'anti-SJW movement' of the mid-2010s, which ultimately tainted the reputation of the identity-skeptical faction of liberalism, and served to validate the criticalists' portrayal of identity skepticism as being in bed with reactionary bigotry. Although this phenomenon came and went in just a few years, I think there are lessons we can learn from it. SJW stands for Social Justice Warrior, a negative term used to describe certain social justice activists, usually the ones seen as unreasonable, confrontational, or counterproductive. This category included plenty of postmodern criticalism driven activism. However, the use of the term broadened so much later on, that some people used it to describe basically anyone supporting social justice. The term SJW hence had a flexibility to it. The vagueness of the term SJW likewise applied to 'anti-SJW'. Hence, the anti-SJW movement included a broad range of people, from those who wanted a more rational and hence effective social justice movement, to those who outrightly opposed any social

change, and might even harbor bigoted beliefs themselves. The only thing they shared in common was opposition to 'SJW activism', which was again defined differently by different people. Over time, the intense focus on being 'against SJWs' encouraged an increasingly broad definition of SJW-ism, which pushed to movement further and further into reactionary conservatism. Ultimately, many of the libertarians jumped ship, leaving the movement to essentially feed right into ultra-conservative politics by the end of its life.

The fundamental problem with the anti-SJW movement was that it was based on people being against something in common, rather than being for something in common. That is why they could not exclude the reactionaries who didn't want social justice reform at all, and ended up being tainted by strong association with this crowd. It is one thing to be concerned about 'SJW activism', especially since a lot of it was rooted in postmodernism and criticalism,

but it is another thing to oppose the concept of social justice altogether. There is still plenty of racism, sexism, homophobia and bigotry in this world, and if we are true liberals, we must keep working to fix this.

The sad history of the anti-SJW movement and adjacent political currents in the 2010s show that we need to be actively 'for liberalism', and not just 'against the illiberal Left'. We should be against the illiberal Left not because we find them 'annoying' or 'uncool', but because we want to see a better path to progress towards social justice, and the illiberal Left's worldview and tactics will actively harm what we want. Being clear about this prevents us from falling into the trap of the 'anti-SJW' attitude.

Chapter 33. Sometimes, You Have To Go Alone

By the late 2010s, the cultural and political landscape of the West had taken what I believed was a turn for the worse. Postmodern critical theory inspired identity politics activism had become the most prominent faction of 'the Left', and old-school liberalism was definitely out of fashion among young adults passionate about social justice. Meanwhile, many of those who opposed this new identity politics were taking a 'fight negativity with negativity' approach, which was ineffective, and also predisposed them to effectively siding with reactionaries or even bigots sometimes. Enabled by the design and algorithms of many social media platforms, both camps also largely existed in their own echo chambers, and couldn't see their own faults. In both echo chambers, there was a strong tendency for people to agree with the majority view, and harshly reject those who didn't conform. As a

result, the combination of polarization and conformity (with one's own end of the polarized debate) became increasingly the norm.

Meanwhile, trans activism had become dominated by postmodern criticalist ideology, which promoted dogma like 'gender is a social construct', which complicated and confused the trans rights debate. This allowed anti-trans forces from both the Left (mainly a faction of radical feminists) and the Right (mainly the religious right and other reactionary social conservatives) to gain credibility, and bring on a backlash. The trans debate had effectively become ideologues vs reactionaries, with both camps forgetting that trans lives are real lives. Caught in the middle of all this, I became increasingly frustrated.

And then, I realized something: I probably can't change the world with my own efforts alone, but at least I can maintain my own values, and

forge my own path. I can refuse to go along with all the aforementioned misguided trends, and instead argue for my own views at all times, whether they are popular or not right now. I can do what I believe is correct morally, and what I believe is doing right by my fellow LGBT people. I mean, I risk being hated by people on all sides, and it's actually a lonely path to take. In the 'popularity is everything' world of social media, it's even more difficult. But life has taught me that, sometimes, you have to go alone. After all, I had gone alone, to where few people had gone, multiple times before in my own life already.

Life has taught me that conflicts and unresolved issues are generally a matter of lack of understanding, and given good faith dialogue and patience, things will gradually improve. This means we should approach those who disagree with us with friendliness and good faith, wherever possible, because these things are essential for dialogue and understanding.

Importantly, it means we should never adopt a tribalist us-vs-them attitude, like many activists (both the LGBT activists and the anti-postmodern activists) are doing now. Given my beliefs here, I feel like I need to draw attention to the differences between my approach and their approach. I believe we should never fake unity just to make everyone feel comfortable.

Life has also taught me that whatever situation we are faced with right now isn't forever, and things can change in unimaginable ways in a matter of years. That positivity is the way to win hearts and minds, and the long arc of history does bend towards justice. And most importantly, that in this changing world, the most important thing is to have clarity about what we believe in. If we maintain our values, keep working in good faith, and give it a bit of patience, I believe things will eventually turn out right in the end. These lessons all reinforce the idea that I have to go it alone in times like

these, and also give me strength and guidance in doing so.

And in deciding to go it alone, and be brutally honest about my views, I have found a small but substantial number of people who actually agree with what I say, and appreciate my work. I discovered that not everyone has been captured by the ideologically driven echo chambers yet, and there is still hope for a better conversation. It's just a matter of more people willing to be brutally honest.

V. TAKE A STEP BACK

Chapter 34. It's The Journey That's Important

As I am sitting here writing this (2021), the world is going through the biggest pandemic in a century, and it has been going on for more than a year and a half now. As a result of the pandemic, and the restrictions imposed in many countries around the world, many of us have spent a lot more time stuck indoors, at home, these two years. Even though experts have been warning that something like this might happen, it seems like most people were not psychologically prepared. I guess most people probably don't think about things like this, until they have become reality. As a result of the drastic lifestyle changes required, it has been a hard time for many people.

During this time, many people have been coping by finding things to do. One trend is that people are rediscovering things they had been

interested in some time ago. Sales of once-popular book series like Harry Potter and Twilight are skyrocketing again. Old music videos are receiving new waves of views on YouTube, with people in the comments section talking about how great music was in the 'good old days', this meaning the 80s, 90s, or even just the 2000s, depending on the context. And then, there are the endless old movie marathons people are having on Netflix.

During these two years, I have done my fair bit of looking back at life, and rediscovering lost interests and memories. And what I realized was that, I have actually gone through an interesting journey, and seen many interesting things, in the three and a half decades I have been here in this world. I've seen the many popular cultural phenomenon, including movies, music and books, that have come and made an impact, and how people have connected with and found inspiration and strength in these things. I've seen real history

happen: the fall of the Berlin Wall (which I was too young to actually remember but it was one of the most talked about recent historical events of my childhood era), the arrival of the 'new millennium' (and all the buzz leading up to that), 9/11 (which was sad but it also showed the resilience of the human spirit), the global financial crisis (also sad but it reminded society that economics and making money isn't everything), and of course, marriage equality. And I also saw the most important part of the development of personal computers and the internet, from the early 90s when most computers were text-based (i.e. command prompt) and came with black and white screens, to today's social media connected world. It really is amazing.

What I then realized was that, life is a journey, where you get to see and experience many interesting things, that will not only become fond memories, but also become part of who you are. The cultural phenomenon that inspired

our thinking, the historical events that taught us valuable lessons, they all become part of our conscience. While we all want to get somewhere (achieve our goals) in life, we shouldn't forget that getting there is also an interesting journey in and of itself. We really should take some time to appreciate the journey of life, the journey we have been on, to get to where we are now.

Chapter 35. Final Words on the Democratization of Media

Looking back, we have indeed come far, in terms of independent artists' ability to create and disseminate culture, and in terms of the ability for anyone to 'have a voice' or 'be somebody' if they want to. We are no longer living in a world where only the cultural elite can publish books, share their art with lots of people, make social commentary with potentially great impact on society, or just share one's uniqueness with the world and gain a following. Anyone can do these things now, and for that our lives are richer and our culture is richer.

Are we where we need to be, however? I suggest not yet. We still don't have full democratisation of media and culture. The 'playing field' still isn't as level as in my Eastlands Dreaming novel, although our

technology has well surpassed the 2006 context of that novel. Why? Because those with the money and the mass media control still have plenty of influence. The top 100 music charts are still dominated by radio hits, and much better talent still doesn't make it there. The bestsellers in books are still usually the ones published by major publishers, complete with hardcover and paperback editions. The truth is that, as of 2021, while independent artists can share their art with the world, 'be a somebody' and even have a sizeable following, we still can't hope to compete with the 'big names' backed by big corporations. So we've come a long way, but we're still not 'there' yet.

But then, I believe we are only at the beginning of a major change. As I have said many times, old habits die hard, and the cultural landscape takes time to change. I still believe we can get much closer to the ideals envisioned in *Eastlands Dreaming*, even though we may not completely get there. This is because, over time,

more and more people will adopt a lifestyle that brings them closer to the work of independent cultural artists, and in turn this will bring about a more and more levelled playing field between independent artists and those backed by corporations. For example, the gradual adoption of e-books over time, an area in which we will likely see progress in the decades to come, will greatly level the playing field for independent authors. Of course, those with the money can still advertise liberally. But then, the increasing use of social networks will mean that word-of-mouth may become just as important in the future.

Just as Angelle was optimistic that technology would level the playing field for her in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, I am optimistic that technology will level the playing field for all of us, year-by-year, decade-by-decade.

We are really very lucky to be living in a time where we can actively participate in the culture and offer our angle to the world, even if the playing field is not quite entirely fair as yet. So what are you waiting for? I suggest that, if you haven't started doing so already, it's time to 'join the culture and offer what you've got'. Right now, in 2021, although everyone is theoretically able to be a culture creator, statistically most people are still passive cultural consumers. I think this is a shame. I am optimistic that, over the years, things will improve, as our culture gradually shifts to accommodate this new reality.

I also believe that, in this new cultural landscape, everyone should just be themselves and offer the world what they've got. Everyone should offer their real persona, their real stories, their real ideas and their real beliefs. We have seen, from the golden age of reality TV to the popularity of many independent cultural icons for just being 'real', that people would

much prefer 'real' to 'fake'. The world is also a richer place when everyone is true to themselves. Sadly, some people think that they can become more popular if they fake another personality, another story, or another set of beliefs and values. I don't think this works, personally. My mother had taught me from when I was young to be true to myself and not compromise my integrity for perceived benefits, and I think this has worked very well for me in life, and especially as an independent cultural artist.

Let's put this another way. If you stay real, when others compliment you, you know that they are liking the real you, and this is very rewarding. However, if you fake a persona, and others compliment that persona, it is essentially meaningless to the real you. Why would anyone even do it?

Finally, here are some parting words.

One of the best gifts my mother gave me was to teach me to dare to dream big.

The world is only the way it is because of dreamers. Dreamers came up with new ideas, and worked hard to make them come true. If we didn't have dreamers, we would still be living in caves and hunting for food. Dreamers are central to every improvement that has ever been, and will ever be.

When I was very young, the depressing reality was that only a small, select elite had a cultural voice. But it was always my dream, indeed my plan, to share my stories and my ideas with the world. As my mother often said, 'when there's a will, there's a way'. And indeed, there was a way to fulfil my dreams, right when I was ready to pursue it.

Part of being a culture creator is to dream big, to see things that the conventional just can't see yet. If you want to be a visionary, you cannot be limited by the current context around you. You can't be limited by what's currently 'possible', and what's 'not possible'. History and fortune do not favour those whose thinking is limited in this way.

Just remember, dream big, and you might get there someday.

Chapter 36. The Importance of Telling Our Stories

So this is the story of my journey. My journey towards embracing a positive attitude to life, to our differences, and to the world in general. I have chosen to tell my story in the hope that it will inspire others, and I hope that more people do this too.

I am grateful to the stories of other people, and their life journeys, for inspiring me over the years, and getting me through hard times. Such stories have reached me via various mediums, including books, movies, television, social media, conversation with friends, and more. Life is interesting, and what we learn from it can be unexpected. I wish to contribute to the vast pool of stories already out there, in the hope that one day, my story could be useful to another person out there, who needs a bit of inspiration.

If you have made it this far, thanks for reading my story.

THE END

Also from TaraElla...

The Princess's Spirit Trilogy #1-3:

An Early 21st Century Liberty Movement Story

The early 21st century is a time of unprecedented opportunity for those coming of age. It is a time when many young adults set out to achieve their dreams, be it starting their own business, starting a political movement, or propelling themselves to superstardom. Angelle's dream is to become Cultural Royalty of Pacificland, thus achieving what her mother couldn't. Her vision is based on freedom, dreams, love and fairness for all.

However, she soon finds that whilst change appears to be in the air, the resistance is often even greater. While the early 21st century is a time of opportunity for some, many people remain left behind, and tension and

dissatisfaction is the order of the day in many areas of life. The increasing pitch of the culture wars, and the influence of global movements from the Tea Party to the Occupy Protests, also combine to make Pacificland a daily ideological warzone. Meanwhile, Pacificland gets caught up in a meaningless political stalemate, with reforms like marriage equality stalled seemingly forever.

With her own dreams on the line, will Angelle stay true to her values? And if she does, will it be enough to make a positive difference? Life isn't meant to be easy, but are there rewards for the brave at the end?